

# Prelude

*~Wake Up and Smell the Ashes~*

**Subject AEL-002: Carrie (PL-Blacksteel)**

Recovery: 67%

Status: Unstable

Approximate physical age: Eighteen years, three months.

Location: - - - - -

...That was what was displayed on the screen of the terminal I was looking at. Of course, there was more than just a lone screen. There also was a tube, stretching from the floor, up to the ceiling. A tube that mere moments ago, was filled with some kind of liquid, and suspended in that fluid, was me.

I had awoken suddenly, and I was not sure why, or for how long I was asleep. Was I dreaming? I felt as though I was, but I couldn't remember any of what I dreamt.

Reality had faded in around me, and I opened my eyes. Despite being completely immersed in liquid, I could still breathe just fine. Though, 'twas a little hard to see through. After a few moments of floating in there, the fluid drained out through the floor, and the front of my prison swung open.

Why was I in there? Why did it suddenly let me out? What was the small room that I now stood in? Even if I had once known, I couldn't remember. Whatever the case may have been, the fact was, that was just how things were.

I suppose "Carrie" was my name. That's what was displayed on the terminal, after all. But... "Subject"... I could feel my ears twitch as I read that word.

I decided that just standing around and thinking wouldn't do me any good, and 'twould probably be a good idea to look around, maybe find out more about where I am, and hopefully find a way out of here. Out to where? I did not know, but I did know that staying there would be no way to live.

...Let's see. I was standing in a small room, there was my own tube against one wall, in the center, flanked by two identical to it, though they both were lacking any kind of resident. The terminals by the other tubes were completely dim, so I couldn't read anything from them. Aside from them, there was a desk in the corner with a dull knife laying on top of it. 'Twould be better than my bare paws, I suppose.

I leaned down and instinctively reached for it with my left hand, and—hmm? Rather than a limb of flesh and blood, 'twas crafted of a pitch-black metal, with shallow grooves running all over it, and visible joints at points of articulation! Actually, more than just my hand, my entire arm up to a little past my elbow was made of the same material. W-was my other arm like that? I quickly brought it up into my field of vision.

I felt myself let out a sigh of relief.

*Nay, my right arm is normal...* My right arm extended from my shoulder with flesh, like normal, and was coated in fur that started just above my elbows, in a white that quickly faded to crimson and extended all the way down to my fingers, which were tipped with retractable claws. That was more like what I was expecting. I looked back to my dominant arm, and cautiously tried to move and twist it about.

Well, it certainly moved just like I would expect of a normal limb, and on top of that, it had claws that could retract, just like my right paw.

I suppose... I suppose 'tis fine, then. Hmm... with something like my arm, did I even need the knife I was looking at? I decided to grab the knife anyway, just in case, and tucked it away in my...

Oh. Right. I looked to the wall to the right of the tubes. It was covered partially in a reflective surface, and sure enough, staring right back at me through the mirror was a short, completely unclothed girl holding a knife. I decided to take a moment to better acquaint myself with my appearance.

Hmm... Not bad. Her visage was youthful, and her faintly-glowing, white-irised eyes drooped slightly. Her head had long, straight, crimson hair, and was topped off with two similarly-colored large, white-tipped canine ears. She opened her maw, and inside was a normal tongue, and a fine set of teeth, accompanied by a set of fangs that were quite sharp.

She had a slender frame, and was obviously malnourished, but despite that, her hips still flared out noticeably, and her rump was nicely rounded, with a crimson,

white-tipped, fluffy tail sprouting out just above it. Her chest, however... 'Twas quite small. Oh well. As for what lay 'twixt her legs, well, 'twas something, for sure.

...Well, anyway, the point is, I was quite fetching, but I was naked and vulnerable. 'Twould be a good idea to find something to cover myself up with.

And, rather conveniently, there was a tattered, dull-white coat draped over the desk's chair. I quickly threw it on, and... it didn't fit me very well. The ends were fraying and stained red, and there were holes leaving parts of my midsection uncovered. But still, 'twas certainly better than having nothing at all. I slipped the knife into one of the front pockets. And—ah, right, the desk itself. Let's see.

There were all sorts of papers scattered on the desk's surface. Most of them were far too worn to properly make anything out. Of the scant few that were still somewhat legible, most of them really didn't seem worthwhile. Most were merely research papers, with titles like "*Report on the Dynamics of Magisteel*", and such. Ordinarily, I would have rather enjoyed reading them, but they wouldn't help me get out of there. Though, I did pocket a couple for future reading.

There was, however, one scrap of paper that caught my eye for the present. 'Twas placed inside a protective sleeve, as if someone wanted to make sure it would be preserved. I picked it up and laid my eyes upon its words.

In a hasty, scrawled script, it read...

*You have been injured, but this chamber shall restore your body. I do not know how long it will have taken by the time you awaken. We likely shall not be around by then, and I pray those that are searching for you will not be either. Please be cautious around others, and do not let yourself be used.*

Huh... 'Twasn't much, and what little there was was rather ominous, but at least I knew part of the why of my being in that tube. ...I had thought I felt fine, but that terminal had said I was only "67% recovered". Whatever that meant.

*Gah...*

...A wave of pain throbbed through my head, and I was overcome by vertigo. I suppose I truly wasn't doing too great, and come to think of it, I was quite thirsty as well. All right then, my new number one priority was finding some food and drink so I wouldn't collapse.

I could feel a dull pain running all the way up my left arm. Ignoring that slightly-unsettling fact, I put the letter in one of my coat's pockets and made my way to the room's door. I was unsure about how to open it. There was a pad on the wall next to it, but no matter what I did with it, nothing happened.

*I... I can't be locked in here.*

I began to panic. I struck my fists against the door. ...Nothing. Not even a dent. I tried to steady my breathing and calm down. The ache in my arm grew stronger.

*Aaaahhh. Oowww.*

My breathing became ragged. I didn't want to be stuck there. I didn't want to die.

More than just pain, I felt a tingling sensation running all the way up and down my arm. I began to act upon some strange sort of instinct. I extended my left arm, bracing it with my right, and placed my palm against the surface of the door.

I grit my teeth and pushed as hard as I could. I didn't make any headway for the first moments, but for some reason, I was confident that it would work.

A dull crimson glow crept up my arm through the grooves and channels covering it, leaving a tingling sensation in its wake. I felt the door give way, just a little bit. I kept pushing. And pushing.

Little by little, the door began to stretch out and crumple inwards on itself. The glow covering my arm flowed up to my hand, concentrating all in one place, and I gave one last push with all of my heart and soul.

## ***Ka-BLAM!!!***

A wave of energy rushed up my arm, and its parts clanged loudly as they shifted against each other. The energy exploded out from my palm with huge percussive force. The sudden blast ripped the door out from its frame, sending it flying out and across the outside hallway, and sending me stumbling back a few steps.

*Oof...* I was not expecting *that*. Well, the door was open now, and so, I stuck my head out through the opening and looked both ways. 'Twas a hall that stretched out in both directions and was in far worse a state than my room. While the room I was in was

merely dusty, the hall's walls and ceiling were crumbling, and there was debris scattered all over the floor.

The lights in my room shone brightly enough for me to see clearly, but the lights in the rest of wherever I was all shone dimly, though still bright enough for me to make out vague shapes.

It looked like going to the right would lead me to a large open room, so to the right I went. All of the other doors in the hall were locked, so I couldn't get in. Well, not without the risk of trying to blast them away. Anyway, the direction I took led to a large open room with long tables with benches in it. A hall for eating, perhaps? I cast my gaze around the room.

*Aha!* I spotted the kitchen, or at least what I thought was the kitchen. I lightly jogged over to its door, and sure enough, the sign on the wall named it to be just as I thought. Surely there would be some food or water or something in there.

*Thankfully*, this door was a normal hinged door, not some strange-panel-locking door. I pushed the door open and walked in. I glanced around. There were a handful of wooden crates on the floor. A good place to start, I suppose.

A few full of fruits, some more full of cured meat, and a couple filled with various types of bread. All rotten and inedible. Just wonderful. That meant that anything else perishable would be rotted too, like as not. I suppose it was foolish to expect anything in there to be preserved.

Scanning my surroundings for anything that stood out, I spotted a lone box crafted from metal. It looked as though it was made of the same jet-black material as my arm.

*Agh...* There was that unusual sensation in my arm again. I clumsily walked over to the box to get a closer look at it. Yes, 'twas definitely made of the same metal as my arm, and furthermore, it even had similar grooves and channels running all over it, all converging around a slightly raised plate on the box's top. Hmm...

I placed my mechanical paw on the box's plate. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. And with all of the willpower I could manage, I focused on my paw. I tried to imagine pouring my entire being down through my arm, across my fingers, and into the plate.

I felt a tingling sensation rush across my entire body, before converging into my arm and rushing down through it. I opened my eyes to see small arcs of energy crackling in the air around my arm. I gave it one last *push*, and I felt it flow through my hand into the box's surface.

A glow ran all throughout the grooves on the box's surface, and its top face raised slightly before separating into two halves and folding in. I pulled my hand back and peered into the box.

The air on the inside of the box was strangely cool, and it was empty aside from a medium-sized flask crafted from some manner of silvery metal. I picked it up and swirled it around a little. 'Twas definitely full of something. But why was it in such a

strange container? And was the box made for *me*, or was it just a convenient coincidence that my arm could mimic whatever kind of key went to it?

*Haaahh...* I was so thirsty. Drool was escaping from my maw just from thinking about the possibility of having something to drink. I took the cap off. I couldn't see inside, nor could I smell anything in particular from it.

*Well... No smell means no **bad** smell...*

I wasn't really thinking straight. My head was foggy from a combination of exhaustion, thirst, and hunger. Maybe whatever was in the flask would help with one of those?

Still with a bit of hesitation, I brought the mouth of the flask up to my lips. I closed my eyes and tilted it up, allowing some of what was inside to flow into my maw. A cool, refreshing sensation filled my mouth.

But alongside that, I was assaulted by the taste of iron.

...

Blood. It was blood. I immediately spat out what still remained in my mouth, but... Ugh. I had definitely already swallowed some. I shook my head to try and calm myself down.

*Aahhh... ...*Rather than calming down, I felt a restlessness filling me. Like something was tugging away, deep in the pit of my stomach. Something was not right. It... felt... *good*...?

'T-'twas still liquid, right? 'Twould still quell my dehydration. ...right? Surely just a little bit more wouldn't hurt. My very being filled with a mixture of fear and shame, and my hands shaking, I brought the flask back up to my lips. I took a small amount of the crimson liquid into my maw, and swallowed.

*Mmh...* I could feel it plunging down my throat and into my stomach. And in my stomach, I felt that unsettling stirring again before falling to my knees.

*Ah! Ohhh...!*

The deep red fluid itself was refreshingly cold, but my body felt as though it was burning up. Heat suffused my entire being. Especially... Well, nevermind... It felt as though my body was moving on its own as I downed the rest of the flask's contents as if my very life depended on it.

My mind went blank, the world faded away around me... I collapsed face-down onto the floor. And there I laid, writhing in the burning throes of twinned pain and pleasure.

The world came back in around me after some time. And I again did not know how long I was out for. It could have been centuries, and I doubt anything in my surroundings would have changed. The one thing telling me it hadn't been that long was the still-wet puddle of blood and drool that my head was lying in.

I pushed myself back up and fell back onto my rear. I looked down at my paw to find myself still holding on to the flask. I gave it a single swish. 'Twas completely empty.

I... I really drank all of it, didn't I? Well... 'Twas in me already, and the only way to get it out would be to make myself vomit it back up, and that would certainly only serve to make me feel worse.

But... Speaking of how I felt, I actually felt quite... *energized*. My body felt strangely light, like I could run forever. Of course, I wouldn't be testing that. All I'd done was drink some blood, it wasn't as though I had a proper meal. I whirled back up to my feet and looked around one last time. Nothing else of note, just more crates, likely filled with rotted food that would only make me unwell.

*Time to try and find a way out now, then.*

I pocketed the flask, and walked out of the kitchen, through the way I came in, back into the large hall. I could have gone back the way I came, towards the room I first awoke in, but I decided to continue pressing in the direction I had chosen prior.

I ended up trudging through another hallway, decorated with doors scattered on either side. I tried to pull the new trick I'd learned from opening the box on some of the doors' panels to no avail before giving up and just continuing to walk forward.

Eventually, the hallway split off to the left as well as continuing straight, but the left path was blocked by an insurmountable pile of rubble reaching to the ceiling. It seemed like I didn't have much of a choice. Eventually, I could see the hallway open up into a room that was even larger and grander than the mess hall.

I reached the mouth of the hallway and found myself in a grand shaft, the floor clinging to the walls around a gaping pit, with a pathway across the middle that led to a

large platform attached to the wall opposite the entrance. I walked up to the railing and peered over. The pit seemed to stretch down into the darkness forever. I tilted my neck upwards, and likewise, the walls seemed to stretch upward into an infinite black void.

I walked straight along the path to the platform. It was made of a sturdy metal, and attached along rails that stretched up and down just as endlessly as the pit along the wall. I took a step forward and it shifted very slightly under my weight. That didn't particularly fill me with confidence, but it still seemed sturdy enough. I walked over to a raised panel directly on my right. It had a small screen with buttons labeled with up and down arrows next to it, though the screen was blank.

To the left of the screen was another flat pad, like those beside the doors of the hallways, except this one had **0F** etched onto its surface. I placed my palm flat against it and willed my energy through my arm. Lightning zipped through my very being, down my arm, and into the panel.

## ***Ka-thunk.***

I heard the sounds of heavy machinery lazily coming to life, and felt the ground tremble slightly beneath me. Slowly, I felt the platform beneath my feet begin to rise. The walkway I was standing on moments ago began to sink as my ascent hastened.

It kept going up, and up, and up... I passed more walkways, each dimly illuminated, with their own halls leading off in different directions. ...How deep was I?

It seemed as though I was ascending forever, passing by an unending number of floors, each with their own complex maze of hallways, like as not. ...Thinking about that made my head spin.

...

*Upward and onward... Higher, and upwards... And up and up... Ugh.*

Eventually, the walls closed in around the platform, leaving no empty space. Higher and higher still, I rose. I felt my ascent begin to slow. The platform stopped, suddenly, making a loud *clunk* as it locked into place. I couldn't see anything. 'Twas black as the darkest night, all around me. I cautiously walked to where I thought the front edge of the platform was, and leaned over to feel for any kind of floor in front of it.

Sure enough, I felt the cold metal surface of the platform give way to a cold, stony surface instead. I brought my fist up and gently struck the ground to try and feel its stability.

*Thump.*

'Twas nice and stable, enough such that I felt comfortable walking off my platform. I walked forward, slowly and carefully until I felt my foot rub up against a wall. I put my right hand against it, and followed with it on my right. I reached a corner, and followed around it, before bumping against the platform's railing.

So, not that way. I turned around and went the other way, with the wall to my left this time. It was hard to gauge distance in the darkness, but I could tell the wall went further in this direction. I felt my hand bump up against a sconce on the wall. Hmm, maybe... Yes! There was a torch mounted in the sconce. I grabbed it, and... I didn't have any way of lighting it. Well, it wouldn't hurt to hold on to it for a little while.

I continued to slowly shuffle forward until my feet collided with a raised step. I cautiously tried to step up onto it, and met with yet another step above it. Stairs, then. I ascended them one step at a time, still bracing myself with my left hand firmly pressed against the wall. I stumbled a bit and my claws dug into the stone wall beside me, leaving a small trail of glowing sparks in their wake.

Hm... Sparks. That gave me an idea. I straightened myself back up, and positioned the torch in my right paw against the wall, with my left hand above it. I dug my claws in, and swiftly brought my arm down, right past the tip of the torch. Sparks kicked into the air around the torch, but it failed to light. How frustrating. Not to be discouraged, though, I tried again, pressing my claws against the wall even harder, and sending out even more sparks. A few landed on my torch, and...

*Fwoosh.* It caught fire, illuminating my surroundings.

*Agh!* The sudden light burned my eyes. I stood there squinting for a short time, until my pupils narrowed. I could see my surroundings at last. I looked around, and just as I had thought, found myself in a narrow hallway carved from stone, on the first few steps of a staircase leading up.

I reached the top and the hallway took a turn to the right. How utterly dull this was. At least I wasn't in complete darkness anymore. After a few minutes more of walking, the hallway terminated with a completely smooth, stone door. I pulled on the handle a bit, but nothing happened.

Hmph. There was only one way to open it now, it seemed. I held my left arm out behind me, my fingers spread and my claws bared. I felt a now-familiar tingling in my arm as I swung my arm up, and then back down at the door in an arcing motion with all my might. The door crumbled to a pile of rubble beneath my might, leaving the way open.

I held my torch high as I walked through the opening. My meagre handheld light only illuminated a small part of the vast cavern I had entered, and not a shred of sunlight pierced the darkness. To my right was... a steep drop into nothing. The ground I was standing on followed to the left, hugging the wall tightly as it sloped upward. 'Twould have been a poor idea to take the plunge to my right, so to the left I went.

'Twas quiet as the dead, which, combined with the caverns surrounding me, only served to amplify the noise I was making. My footsteps, my breathing, the subtle clinking of my arm and rustling of my coat. They all felt deafening in my ears.

Another few minutes of walking, and the path turned sharply to the left, burrowing into the wall. 'Twas making me feel awfully claustrophobic, all of a sudden. I could hear and feel my heart thumping even harder and louder until the narrow passageway opened up into a much wider tunnel with a completely flat floor.

The tunnel twisted and turned in all sorts of directions, with stalactites and stalagmites extending from the floor and ceiling. Eventually, the space around me opened up to another cavernous chamber, with a long rope bridge suspended over a pit of pointed stone spikes.

And on the other side of the bridge, I could faintly see light spilling in. At last, the exit to this place was within my reach. I took a cautious first step out onto the bridge. It swayed disquietingly under my weight. I took a few steps further across the bridge. The space between footholds was greater than I was comfortable with, but the footholds themselves were full capable of holding my weight. I made it just about two-thirds of the way across before...

Vertigo washed over me once more. The world around me was spinning, my limbs felt leaden, and my footing had become unsteady.

*Just make it to the end.* I thought to myself. 'Twas not what happened, however. I tried to take another step, and as I brought my foot down, I felt it slip straight off the edge. 'Twas too late, there was no escaping my fate, I had misstepped, and was falling into the abyss.

***Skssh...***

One of the pointed stone spikes pierced through my back, jutting out through my front. Ah. That was it, then. My senses faded away completely.

The girl laid completely still, skewered atop the jagged, red-stained point. Blood slowly flowed out around the gaping wound in her chest. She was well and truly dead.

However... Rather than flowing down and falling to the floor, the blood streaming from her wound crawled up her left shoulder, and washed back down over her arm. Blood seeped in through the grooves running across it, and a crimson light began to shine out from within, growing brighter and brighter. Her arm began to tremble, as if it was threatening to fall to pieces.

And fall to pieces it did. Its parts burst out and circled around each other in the air, still outlining the shape they had held before. And in the center of their orbits, was a stream of blood gushing forth from the stump of her arm left behind. The flow of blood concentrated and pulled itself together into the form of a huge, thick tendril.

The tendril reached up for the sky, with the bits of black steel orbiting around its end. It reached up and over the ledge that the girl had been trying to reach before she had fallen. The tip of the tendril contorted itself into the shape of a giant hand, and the metal orbiting it formed into a set of imposing claws. Her claws dug deep into the ground, finding firm purchase.

The tendril flexed and contracted, causing her lifeless body to ascend up and off of the spike she was impaled upon. Her arm hoisted her up and over the ledge, laying her flat on the ground of her destination. Still she laid motionless, with a gaping hole in her chest where her heart and lungs should have been.

Her tendril of blood retracted back into her arm, and the shards of steel re-arranged themselves back together. Blood continued spilling out from around her wound, but began forming and holding itself in to fill the hole in her chest.

My senses returned to me. I could feel the cold, hard ground pushing up against me, and—

*Gaaahh!*

...And a fierce, piercing pain in my chest. I opened my eyes, and I found myself lying face-down on the floor on the other side of the bridge. Pale moonlight gently flooded in, faintly illuminating my surroundings.

I... I thought I had fallen and died, but there I was. Alive. 'Twas a delusion, I supposed. I must have blacked out, somehow stumbled to the end of the bridge, and collapsed onto my chest at the end. Or, so I figured. 'Twas the only explanation that made all that much sense to me. But it didn't explain the hole in the back of my coat. Was it new? I wasn't actually sure.

With great effort, I pushed myself up to my knees, and then back onto my feet. I looked over in the direction the light was coming from. The ground tilted up slightly, and the walls veered off to the left. I shook my head in an attempt to ward off my dizziness, and started walking towards the light.

The passage's gentle upward slope and leftward curve continued for a small while, but it eventually flattened and straightened out. The walls and ceiling gave way to the mouth of the caverns, and I saw the stars in the night sky hanging high above me.

I stood there, awestruck, staring at the twinkling stars, and the gently-shining radiance of the full moon. *The moon...* My eyes stayed fixated upon it. 'Twas truly beautiful. I felt as though its gentle glow was washing over me.

I snapped out of my reverie and glanced around the ledge I now found myself on. 'Twas jutting out from the side of a steep cliff, the sort you would have to carefully climb up, rather than simply walking. I looked back behind me to the mouth of the... Hmm?

The cave's entrance was gone; The cliff face extended all the way to the ground where the entrance just was. I walked up to the wall and went to place my paw against it, and my arm went straight through. 'Twas some manner of illusion to hide the entrance, then. I... I decided I would etch this place into my memory. Not that I wanted to ever come back. Something just... I just felt very strongly that I should remember how.

I was standing on a ledge sticking out from a nearly-vertical cliff face. I looked down to see a vast forest beneath me, but there was no obvious way for a normal person to get down. Thankfully, 'twas not the case that I was normal. I dropped down and hung on to the edge with both arms.

I took my left paw off, and forcefully slammed my claws into the side of the wall.

I took my right paw off, and braced myself with my feet as I slid down.

My feet connected with solid ground once again, and found myself at the edge of the forest I had seen from above. The canopy of leaves blotted out most of the moonlight, but I could still faintly see within. I pressed inwards in as straight of a line as I could until I eventually reached a dirt path.

I found a thick-trunked tree on the side of the path, in the direction of the cliff I had come from, and savagely swiped at it with my claws, leaving a gash in its side. There. 'Twould serve as a landmark if ever I needed it. I turned back around, and, satisfied with my handiwork, I followed the path off to my right.

The path curved around particularly large trees here and there, and there was the occasional fallen log for me to step over, but following it was a simple affair. Nothing happened, and I didn't cross paths with anyone.

I at last approached the edge of the forest. I could see a wide open plain with rolling hills just beyond the threshold.

I felt the guillotine of exhaustion hanging just above my neck, ready to claim me at any moment. I did not want to collapse *again*, so I found a comfortable-looking spot that was just off the path and concealed by the underbrush, and then curled up like a fox, or a wolf.

Darkness claimed me, and I fell to sleep beneath the sunless sea...