

She's strapped down to a gurney, sleeping quietly, the moon shining a hollow light down onto her from the window above. The three straps are fastened around her sleeping body, and under her, the light blue mattress remains clean and spotless, even after multiple nights of her being here. The pillow cover under her head is stained, with a few tiny maroon drops visible. Her resting place is mostly clean and sterile, except for the tubes. On each arm, near the wrists, a translucent, grimy tube trails up into the ceiling, disappearing into a tile. I reach my hand out and place it on her abdomen, cold and lifeless. Her face is as pale as the moon shining above her; some of her veins are even visible, tiny blue lines snaking all along her body. From all signs, she appears dead, except for one sign: a heartbeat. It happens once every sixty minutes, one tiny "blump". It doesn't sound fleshy or alive; rather, it sounds like a hushed crack, akin to tearing a piece of plastic underwater. I slowly retract my hand and softly slap her face a few times, not awake. Not awake, but alive. How? Regardless, the operation must commence. I need my gloves.

The tube on her left arm is shoved deep inside her. I give it a gentle pull and feel resistance—a lot of it. I trail my finger on her arm, trying to feel how deep the dirt-matted tube goes inside her. Beyond her arms, they go deeper than the arms. Once again, I pull again, harder this time, with no movement. I grab a scalpel, cold and sharp, and make a small incision near the tube entrance. No blood falls from the fresh wound; however, the smell of iron begins to emanate from the cut, bitter and faint. Looking inside her, the tube can't be seen—just gray ash. I fold back the flesh, trying to get a better look at the inside of her arms. more ash, and suddenly the ash begins to change colors. Where there used to be ash the color of silver, now there's a cacophony of muted colors, brown, black, gray, and white. I put the scalpel down and took a few steps back. I look up. The left tube is now crystal clean. It's like somebody completely replaced the tube with new, fresh-out-of-the-factory ones. I sift through the ash and find nothing; it just keeps going. It hasn't stopped; I put my entire left hand in there, and there was still more.

I plunge my left arm back into the sea of ash, lowering it deeper and deeper every moment until it feels both hot and cold. I pull my hand back. The tip of my index finger is glowing a bright blue, barely visible through my glove; it smells like damp wood. What? Upon further inspection, the tip of my finger is also rippling slightly, with tiny bumps appearing occasionally and then disappearing. I rip the latex glove off my left hand and take the scalpel in the other. A tiny cut is made on the tip of my finger—no blood comes out, yet the smell permeates the room. I peer inside and see nothing—just an empty void—no flesh, no blood, no ash. She must have caused this; the reports told me this could happen; now I'm compromised as well. I suppose the only thing I can do, for medicine's sake, is to continue with the operation. My gloves did not protect me from whatever affects her body caused, so I can go in bare and the result won't change, right? I slowly twirl my right index finger deep inside the cut made on her right arm, ash is the same dead color as before, feels slightly cool. I pull out the finger and it looks exactly like its left counterpart. No visible changes observed, both arm incisions provide the same result when organic material comes in contact. No body protection needed.