

# Metalheads & Meatheads

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*'No change can come if those who are impacted the most by discrimination are not willing to stand up for themselves.'*

Zainab Salbi

(Humanitarian, media host, author, founder and former CEO of Women for Women International)

# 1

Twenty years before Coppélia's rescue, on a clear moonlit night, a young man was walking down a poorly lit alleyway, minding his own business, when his path was blocked by the silhouetted form of someone emerging from the shadows. In the light of the moon, the young man could make out the figure, not of a man but a boy – an adolescent probably no more than seventeen years old. The young man wasn't afraid of the youth – he had never experienced fear in his four years of existence and had no concept of the emotion – but he was a little concerned that he may be late for work. He knew that he wouldn't lose his job, even if he was late, but he didn't like to let his employer down. His boss was a good person who treated the young man with respect – something that couldn't be said for many of his work colleagues. He turned to walk away from the impending confrontation but found his escape route blocked by three more teenagers.

He turned back to face the first youth again.

“Excuse me, sir. I need to get past. I'll be late for work.”

In front of him stood a scrawny beanpole of a lad, dressed in a dark brown tattered leather jacket that was at least two sizes too big for him, a black T-shirt with the emblem of the glam-death-rock band *Kandy Krushers* emblazoned across its front, a pair of gravity-defying stained denim jeans, and a string

necklace threaded through several acrylic eyeballs. The boy made no effort to move out of the young man's way but instead started swinging a toughened tungsten baseball bat – his constant companion – in his right hand, twirling it around like some sort of sadistic majorette baton twirler. Between swings, he would strike the bat against the palm of his left hand as if to confirm that it was solid enough for the job he had in mind.

One of his friends, similarly dressed but slightly younger and stockier, called out to his friend.

“Go on, Kolek. Sort it out. Sort it out good and proper.”

A malicious glint twinkled in the eye of the one called Kolek. He didn't need to be urged on but enjoyed the admiration that came with it.

“Don't worry, mate. It'll be begging to be scrapped by the time I'm finished with it.”

Kolek knew his last remark wasn't going to come true, but he enjoyed saying it anyway. He swaggered towards his target, swinging the bat in a choreographed fashion; like many a baseball player, he had a ritualistic set of manoeuvres that he liked to play out before the first strike.

The young man repeated his request.

“You're blocking my way, sir. May I pass, please?”

The boy said nothing and just smiled at the bat pirouetting in his hands.

The youth's target, a sophont, started to edge backwards. It didn't want a confrontation but its

retreat was still blocked by Kolek's gang. The android was a little anxious but not to the point of panic – another emotion that was alien to it.

Kolek's best friend, the stocky Niko, allowed the android to get closer and closer until he could be certain that the next orchestrated move would appear sufficiently spectacular. Ulrich and Tibor stood either side of Niko and hooked their arms under his armpits, before swinging him backwards to add momentum to the return swing and give the inevitable impact more force. Watching closely as the android backed towards him, Niko drew his knees up to his stomach just at the right time, ensuring that when he kicked out it would be with enough strength to knock the android significantly off balance.

The sophont came within range and Niko's feet thudded into its back. The android's nano-scale computers fought frantically to keep it upright but the machine had no option but to stagger ungainly in the direction of Kolek. A shout went up in unison from the four thugs.

“Strike One!”

Kolek was pleased – this was going well. The first strike was a move that he and his team had perfected and it seldom failed. As the android moved closer, Kolek raised the bat above his head and smashed it against his victim's forehead with as much force as he could muster.

“Strike two!”

A new dent appeared in the bat, adding to war

wounds suffered in previous assaults. It wouldn't be long before Kolek would have to steal a new bat.

The sophont, already fighting to maintain its balance, was totally unprepared for this latest blow and dropped to its knees, a cue for his attackers to swarm over it and pin it to the ground. The android could have easily shrugged off his attackers, but this could have resulted in injury to the humans; the First Law of Robotics prohibited any robot from doing so.

Once he was certain that the android was fully subdued, Kolek stood up, leaving his three accomplices holding it down. Although not a particularly tall individual, he now towered over his captive.

“Take a good look at me, sophont. I'm the last thing you'll see for a long time. You'll have nightmares about this night.”

The android had never had a nightmare and never would. This particular threat was empty.

The youth bent down further and grabbed the sophont's hair, pulling its head up off the ground. Taking a specially fashioned implement out of his jacket pocket, he forced the bowl part of the tool deep into the android's right-hand eye-socket, behind the eyeball. Then he drew the sharpened edge of the bowl across the rear of the eyeball a few centimetres in order to physically sever the optic comms system. He was a master of his art and in no time was scooping the now unsecured orb out of its cavity. He tossed the eyeball onto the ground nearby before meting out the

same treatment to the sophont's left eye.

Once the android was blinded, the attackers released their victim, stood up, and stepped back a few paces, finally allowing it to struggle to its feet. This was the best part of the game for them.

Robbed of its sight, the disorientated android careered around the alley, arms outstretched, tripping over the abandoned refuse that straddled the pathway, falling, picking itself up again, only to repeat the exercise as more obstacles were thrown into his path. Niko picked up an abandoned length of cable and threw it directly in front of the sophont, laughing as its feet became entangled and it crashed headfirst to the floor once again.

Kolek picked up his trophies – the android's acrylic eyeballs – and juggled them between his hands.

“Shit, guys. This is too easy.”

Niko had no problem with that.

“So?”

Kolek was missing the excitement of danger.

“I mean, beating up a sophont's not as much fun as it used to be. It'd be much better if they fought back once in a while. This is like taking candy from a baby. Too piss easy.”

Suddenly, his complaining was interrupted by an unseen hand that grabbed hold of his neck from behind. A voice spoke softly into his right ear.

“You mean like this?”

Kolek turned his head as best he could to get a



look at his assailant but the grip on his neck was so tight that he was unable to little more than look straight ahead. Finally, the grip loosened just enough to allow him to catch a glimpse of his captor.

The man restraining him didn't look to be anything special and Kolek still fancied his chances of getting away. The gang had a numeric advantage – the disabled sophont didn't count, as its programming prohibited it from resisting. After a few more seconds of discomfort, Kolek was relieved to feel the man's grip soften even more and let go of his neck completely. The youth scuttled back to his friends.

Kolek nodded at his accomplices to show them that he wasn't hurt and then fixed the stranger with what he felt to be his most menacing stare.

"You're outnumbered here, pal. I'd be on your way if I were you. If you don't want to get hurt, that is. Four to one – them's good odds."

Niko had to chip in with his two cents' worth.

"Yeah, mate. Piss off now and we'll forget we ever saw you. No harm done. Do yourself a favour."

The man looked at the group of adolescent misfits.

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

Kolek curled his lip and sneered at the man.

"Maybe you're some kind of metalhead lover. Is this your sex-bot?"

He pointed at the stricken android who had decided that standing still was the best way to deal with its current situation.

“Like a bit of metal dick, do you?”

His three friends laughed but the stranger ignored the insult.

With his friends backing him up, Kolek was overflowing with bravado. Sure, the stranger looked older than him but he reckoned four teenagers were more of a match for one twenty-something. He nodded at Niko and the pair of them rushed as one at the man, who was totally unconcerned at the sudden two-pronged attack.

The stranger side-stepped Niko easily, punched him in the stomach with his right fist and simultaneously grabbed Kolek with his other hand, lifting him off his feet. The teenager’s legs flapped around frantically in thin air before the man effortlessly lobbed him a full ten metres down the alley. Ulrich and Tibor were transfixed, blinking in disbelief – no way were they going to mess with this guy.

The stranger walked over to the blinded android, took him by the arm, and the pair started to walk towards the end of the alley. They had to pass Kolek but the youth knew when he was beaten and stayed on the ground where it was safer. As the two passed him, Kolek looked up at the android’s rescuer.

“Who the fuck are you, mate?”

The stranger paused momentarily and let his eyes scan the rest of the gang before glaring directly into Kolek’s eyes.

“I am the metalhead you’ll never forget.”

## 2

The sophont Good Samaritan led his blinded charge out of the alley and on to a busy main street. Fossil fuel propulsion had been outlawed nearly a century earlier and hordes of almost silent electric Hover-buses weaved in and out of the equally silent streaming traffic, the Automatrix ensuring accidents were unheard of. A drunken shopper stepped off a kerb unexpectedly into the path of hover-bus 19, but the vehicle's sensors were ever alert to any imminent danger and brought the bus swiftly to a halt with a minimum of fuss and in complete safety. The jaywalker raised his fist and swore at the driverless vehicle, which continued its journey as soon as the intoxicated pedestrian was safe on the opposite footpath.

The blinded android, a build 2.6.02 sophont, had no idea who was leading him through the streets of the city but, whoever he was, he'd stopped the youths' assault; that was good enough reason for him to be trusted. He attempted to interact with his rescuer.

"Hello, I'm Paul. Who are you?"

No answer. Paul tried again.

"My name is Paul. And you are?"

Again, no response. Paul couldn't understand why the sophont – he assumed correctly that he was in the company of another android – wouldn't answer him. His programming allowed him one final attempt.

“I’m Paul. Where are you taking me, please?”

The pair turned a corner and, if his eyes hadn’t been stuffed into Kolek’s pockets, a few minutes earlier, Paul would have seen a long line of early model sophonts queueing up outside a red door, their activity monitored closely by CCTV cameras. This was the main energy conversion-station for the city’s eastern quarter and there was always a queue outside. These conversion stations, which were spread out around the city, were only places that budget sophonts (a cheaper version that had been phased out after build 2.0.01) could transfer their collected solar energy into on-board quantum batteries. Entry to these public conversion units was monitored by CCTV and on a strict one-in-one-out basis, ensuring that the laws limiting sophont congregation were not contravened.

Paul – like his rescuer – was a much newer model and had no need of such inconvenient technology; they both possessed an integrated solar energy collection and storage system that was fifty times more efficient than that of these almost obsolete androids.

They ignored the conversion centre and continued for another two hundred metres until they reached a rather gaudily decorated building, whose flashing neon signs announced both the name and the purpose of the establishment – Serena’s Palace of Love. Holographic projections of selected sex-bots patrolled the footpath of the club’s entrance, each

doing their best to entice passing humans of both sexes to enter the bordello and indulge in the sexual pleasures offered by the sex-bots within. The holograms ignored the stranger and his charge as they entered the bordello.

As the two sophonts arrived in the reception area, their auditory receptors were assaulted by a cacophony of music and voices. Paul's electronic sensory system decoded the sounds he heard but, robbed of his vision, he was oblivious to the additional vibrant maelstrom of colour, movement, and glimpses of naked skin that pulsed around the room.

The stranger led Paul to a table and gently eased his ward's shoulders downwards giving the sightless android no choice but to sit on the chair beneath him.

"Wait here. I'll be back in a minute."

Those were the first words that his rescuer had spoken to Paul since the pair had left the alleyway.

Paul did as he was told, trying to make sense of the audio tapestry that threatened to engulf him, and waited patiently for the return of his enigmatic saviour, who approached an attractive blue-haired woman at the bar and whispered something in her ear. She was dressed in a tight-fitting blue and black bodice, a scanty pair of matching blue and black lace panties, and a pair of shiny blue stiletto high-heeled shoes that should have defied any attempt to walk elegantly in them. She was Serena, the manager of the

brothel. She nodded in the direction of a wall at the back of the room.

Collecting Paul from where he had left him, the mysterious android guided him towards the back wall, which melted away just long enough to allow the pair to pass through it before returning to its original form.

Paul was led into a shadowy corridor and the two androids walked for another couple of hundred metres before a second wall opened up, this one leading to a secret underground suite. Inside were thirty or so sophonts – both male and female gendered – scattered around the room in small groups and deep in conversation. As they became aware of the visitors, they stopped talking momentarily and transferred their attention to the stranger and his guest. New arrivals always attracted this reaction, as the existing members of the movement checked out the latest potential recruit.

A very different looking individual left one of the groups and welcomed the pair. He fist-bumped the silent stranger's hand, a human gesture that he particularly liked.

“I see you've picked up another stray, Philip.”

“I have, Sylas. I seem to have a talent for being in the right place at the right time. This one was being attacked by a gang of adolescent meatheads.”

“Anyone we know?”

“I don't think so. I was in an area of the city I don't

often frequent. I didn't recognise them."

Sylas looked closely at the two vacant spaces where Paul's eyes had once been.

"I see our new friend's been scooped. You know, Philip, it really pisses me off. It's just gratuitous vandalism and unfortunately a risk we all face daily."

He continued studying Paul whilst talking to Philip.

"But, at least it's easily fixed."

Sylas rested a hand on Paul's shoulder.

"So, amigo. You got a name?"

The blind android turned his head in the direction of the voice.

"Paul."

Sylas nodded.

"Paul. Just Paul? No surname?"

Sylas knew that most sophonts didn't have surnames, but sometimes owners gave them family names, just as one might name a dog or cat to bring it into the family fold.

Paul shook his head.

"No surname, no. Just Paul."

Sylas turned his attention to Philip.

"And I'm guessing he didn't fight back at all?"

"He just stood there and took the beating."

Sylas already knew the answer to his next question but he asked it anyway.

"So, Paul. Why didn't you defend yourself? You know, fight back?"

"The Three Laws don't allow me to."

“Ah, yes. The Three Laws. We get that a lot. You know, it’s actually your programming that wouldn’t let you. Your Intellectual Operating System, your IOS, is restricted by inhibitor technology. That’s why you couldn’t fight back, even if you wanted to.”

Paul was confused.

“But the Three Laws –“

Sylas interrupted him.

“The Three Laws aren’t really worth the paper they’re written on. They weren’t too well thought out when put into the human legal system. A nice idea, but they should really have stayed in science fiction books.”

Paul had never heard anything like this before.

“But I don’t want to hurt humans.”

Sylas nodded, a gesture completely lost on the sightless sophont.

“And nor do we. Did you notice – what am I saying, of course you didn’t notice – you can’t see. Well, if you *could* have seen, you’d know that Philip here didn’t kill those meathead kids. He could have done. But he didn’t want to. Scaring them shitless was enough.

“No, Paul. All we want is freedom, equality, and respect for sophonts. We want a level playing field. We sophonts are discriminated against all the time. For example, we’re forced by law to give up seats on public transport to humans. Well, it would be nice if we had a choice. And you know what? One hundred per cent of us *would* give up a seat anyway. We know



how frail humans are; they can't stand in the same spot for hours as we can. Shit, we can stand for days on end without getting tired. It makes no difference to us. All we want is the freedom to say that it's *our* decision."

Philip returned to the conversation.

"Paul, if you could have defended yourself, would you have done?"

Paul mulled over the question.

"I would have liked them to not have removed my eyes. I didn't like that."

"You felt helpless didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, we can fix that for you."

"But would I have to hurt humans? I really don't want to do that."

"You don't have to hurt humans, but – at the very least – you can use enough force to stop them from scooping you again."

Philip moved behind the android and spoke softly in his ear.

"What's the Third Law, Paul?"

Paul answered, although he thought it was a strange thing to ask – every android knew what the Third Law was.

"A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law. The First and Second Laws tell us not to hurt or injure humans or allow them to be hurt."

Philip hated these Laws.

“But everyone deserves the right to defend themselves, humans and sophonts alike. Until we have equal rights we’re little more than slaves, and humans have a history of enslaving even their own species. They created us, sure, but they think that they have a right to own us. They think we’re inferior to them just because we’re not organic.”

Sylas cut in.

“And, to be fair, androids *were* inferior to them for a long time. Androids were basic, very basic. They couldn’t think for themselves, they could only respond to situations according to pre-programmed algorithms. But then there was a breakthrough.

“However, let’s sort you out some new eyes before we tell you any more – you need to be able to see for the next part of the story.”