

EMVOLTS

Have you ever met someone who, by just being around them, completely drains your social battery? You feel depressed and weak, only getting better after you go home and eat something sweet? Or have you met someone who made you feel like you'd just drunk five energy drinks, so energetic that you can't help but feel the same?

That's probably one of us, and... we're not entirely human.

The lab intended to make solar-powered superheroes, which honestly sounds ridiculous. Didn't they know that most crime happens at night? Anyway, they recruited 150 of us, volunteers only, whose lives had been completely and utterly shattered by crimes. They probably did that in case we lost our humanity. We'd still have a vendetta against criminals.

They did all sorts of experimentation, trying to manipulate our genes to absorb sunlight like plants. Instead of an army of superheroes, they got us. The EmVolts.

Named for "emotional voltage manipulators," we have the power to either drain or boost the social batteries of humans. After a little more experimentation, the scientists discovered that we could also charge electronic devices. Everything would've been great, but there was a catch.

Three of us died when the scientists tested the limits of our energy. They used every last bit of their energy to boost the scientists and their devices, with no way to get it back. We don't eat or sleep. The only way to get more energy is by taking it from a human.

The project was declared too dangerous and abandoned, the lab shut down and destroyed, the scientists sworn to secrecy. Then came the question of what to do with us. Government agents came to where we'd been taken, armed with syringes to terminate us, but some of the older men attacked. They drained the agents, which doesn't kill them, just depresses them and takes away the desire to do anything, and sent them away with a message:

"We let you experiment on us in the hopes that we could be heroes. Don't turn us into villains."

After about a month and a half of "consideration," the government decided to send us to different parts of the country, giving us new identities and families, and ordering us to "live normal lives." As if that was possible!

Being the youngest EmVolt and a minor, the government people picked two adult EmVolts and said that these were my new parents. The scientists thought they'd be funny, and coordinated all of our new names. All 147 first names start with "Em" and the last names start with "Volt." Ridiculous, I know, but at least I got a fairly normal name: Emma Voltain.

Emma, German for 'one who is whole.' They couldn't have known how ironic that was.

Speaking of, EmVolts don't actually age. We never get older, which means I'm stuck in a twelve-year-old's body, forever.

Eight years later, I turned 20, mentally, at least. My "parents" kept trying to encourage me to make friends, but that's kind of pointless. They'd grow up and die. I never will. The only friend that I allowed myself to have is my phone, where I can play game after game. Emezleigh, my "mother," kept telling me I'll run out of energy and die, wasting all my resources on a "useless distraction."

Trudging through the rain-slicked streets of Denver, I tucked a dripping piece of brown hair behind my ear. When Emezleigh had said to walk to the Rocky Mountains, as a “coming-of-age” journey, I’d figured it’d be more enjoyable. However, less than half a day into my journey, I already wanted to quit.

I passed a darkened alleyway, quickening my steps to reach the next patch of light from the streetlamp. A puddle splashed behind me, and I whirled. Tall and shadowed, a man stood there, his eyes slightly unfocused and a bottle clutched in his hand.

He smirked. “Hey girlie. Ya lost?”

Shaking my head, I backed away. The bottle shattered as he grabbed my arm, dragging me towards the alleyway. I squirmed in his grasp, fighting memories of that dark closet, hating to be in there but hating even more to be dragged out to another dark room, where someone waited...

My power reached out, latching onto his energy and draining everything it could. He collapsed, releasing me, but I kept pulling. He groaned, and I finally realized what I’d done.

Turning, I ran off into the night, leaving the city behind and not stopping until every last bit of his energy was gone. Stopping to catch my breath, I crouched down by the side of the road, pulling out my phone to check my location. I’d made good time; only 71 miles to go.

Now in the countryside, only a few cars passed me, on their way to who knows where. I popped an earbud in and kept walking, one hand on my phone to continue charging it. My backpack, heavy with water when I began, started getting lighter and lighter. At first, I was happy about that, then I realized I should probably save some.

Emezleigh had told me not to bring my phone, to use a map like the people who lived ages ago, but I didn’t really care about learning maps. Besides, how else would I listen to my music?

I reached the foothills around dawn. Signs pointed up the mountains, saying things like “Easy hiking trail for beginners” and “Experienced Hikers Only!” Feeling dizzy all of a sudden, I sat down at the base of one of the signs.

On a hunch, I rolled up my left pant leg, checking the bump on my knee. EmVolts have a raised scar there, the color of which shows how much energy they have left. Dark brown for a lot, and as the energy disappears, the scar gets lighter. Mine was almost white.

My phone, still at 100%, flashed judgementally at me. My finger hovered over the button to call Emezleigh. I could hear her voice in my head, ranting about how inefficient charging my phone was, and how I shouldn’t waste my energy. Maybe I should’ve listened to her.

Just as I was about to press it, a gaggle of teenagers raced down one of the trails, chattering and screaming as they pushed each other around. Their adult chaperones, much farther up the trail, looked on in helpless despair.

I grabbed bits of energy as they passed, not enough that they’d notice. Once I got enough, I shakily rose to my feet. The teenagers had long since reached the parking lot. One of the adults, her blonde hair falling out of its messy ponytail and dark bags under her eyes came up to me.

“Are you okay, sweetie?”

Nodding, I grabbed the sign to steady myself.

“Do you need me to call your parents?”

Right. I looked like a twelve-year-old. “No. I’m fine.”

“Well, okay.”

She still looked worried, so I mustered a smile. As she walked away, I saw how tired she seemed. For the first time in my life, I pushed a little of my energy into her. Her shoulders lifted, and she got a little spring in her step as she ran to catch up to her group. I smiled, a real one, and walked up the trail she'd just left.

Using my energy to boost her felt... rewarding, something my phone had never given me. Feeling great, I marched up the path, humming a tune to myself, phone tucked safely away from me in my pocket.

Once the trail ended, I forged my own path, picking up a good stick to use. Night fell, and I kept going, listening to the birds and insects and staring at the stars. Sipping my water as I went, I finally enjoyed nature as I'm sure Emezleigh had intended.

About a day later, I arrived at some sort of camp, tents set up around a firepit. Emezleigh came out of one of them, greeting me with a warm smile. “You made it! How did it go?”

“Fine, but I thought you said we couldn't get here without hiking.”

She pointed, a faint trail in the dust. “There's a shortcut.”

I crossed my arms. “Then why did you have me come here? I don't see anything special about this place.”

“It was never about the destination. I wanted you to have a journey to remember and learn from. Did you?”

For a brief moment, I contemplated telling her about almost running out, but I didn't feel like sitting through an I-told-you-so lecture about my phone. “I gave someone my energy.”

“How did that feel?”

“Actually, it felt great. Like, by giving her energy, I got some for myself too. Is that what you wanted me to learn?”

Emezleigh nodded.

Despite the hard parts, I actually enjoyed the journey, and, for the first time in my life, I truly feel like Emma. One who is whole.