

FLESH

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The hum. I still haven't been able to place it – two nights and a day into arriving. It buzzes and vibrates, just underneath the chink of sterling silver cutlery on fine bone china, the tink of fine crystal glasses as we made mimosa toasts, and the warm, low laughter of a patio packed with us: the near deceased.

We'd been given three days up here. Three days to... well, prepare, I guess you could say. The unpleasant arrangements had been made back on Earth. That had been one of the conditions: arrive at L5 with all your ducks in line. So here we were, a gaggle of giggling geriatrics, with our ducks lined up, ready to die.

I place my glass back on the table, savouring the heady buzz of champagne on my palate, and wink to the woman across from me (Sue? Susan? Dammit, I've forgotten already). She gives me a wrinkly wink in return, a sparkle still present in her rheumy eyes. I reach across the white tablecloth and snatch the last piece of bread from the basket – still warm from whatever oven it had emerged from.

The bread up here was something else. They said it was made in ovens situated in hub (the centre of this

giant wheel spinning slowly in space); which could explain the excessive airiness of it. I smear a pad of soft butter onto it, which melts right into the air pockets, and quickly cram the whole thing in my mouth, before it drips over my sweater vest. Ah, fresh bread! Crunchy on the outside; velvety smooth on the inside. Liquid butter trickling towards my throat. I think I let out a soft moan as I chewed, because Sue/Susan is chuckling at me.

“Robert, this damned place is giving me a migraine!” That's Harvey. His chair squeals on the patio tiles as he pulls it out from the spot beside me. He drops his bulk down and clears his throat noisily. I forget the magical bread in my mouth and prepare for a barrage from my new cottage-mate. He's not my choice of roommate, but for the sake of three days up here, it's not worth making an issue of it. After this, we won't have to worry about seeing each other again.



“That goddamn incessant ringing is driving me bonkers, I tell ya.” Harvey’s wearing ill-fitting sweatpants and an overlarge t-shirt emblazoned with some running competition he may or may not have attempted decades ago. “Did you know the toilets flush backwards here? What’s that about? It’s distressing, is what it is.”

Yep. Harvey likes to complain, alright. Sue/Susan loses her smile, avoiding any further eye contact with me, as if he’s my fault.

We’re not supposed to get to know our cottage-mates too well – or anyone else, for that matter – but I’ve managed to deduce that Harvey was a New Jersey corporate lawyer, who recently lost his wife, Marilyn. Well, by ‘deduced’, I mean he blurted it out when we first met. It was pretty evident, too, by the way he clearly has not dressed himself in probably half a century. I hadn’t reciprocated, though, telling him nothing about my reason for being here, my former career, or that I’d been unattached for more years than I care to think of.

I mechanically swallow the hunk of forgotten bread in my mouth, when I catch something out the corner of my eye. It’s a pair of uniformed company employees emerging from inside (isn’t everything ‘inside’ here, though? I still haven’t decided.), each grasping their ‘pads tightly. I clear my throat and toss my chin in their direction, for Harvey’s sake: he’s still going on about something or other.

“Ah! Well, it’s about time! It’s not like we have much left, as it is!” My cottage-mate attracts the attention

of most everyone at adjacent tables, including one of the uniforms, who glances at Harvey, looks at her ‘pad, then back over at him. Her partner raises a finger to silence us all.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I hope you slept well. It’s time for the presentation. Please feel free to continue eating as the subjects circulate for your viewing. We do ask that you neither speak to them, nor feed them, though.” A few people chuckle, including myself, though the uniforms don’t join in. I guess they’re serious about the no-feeding policy. The company guy checks his ‘pad, tapping and sliding his fingers across it for a moment, before nodding. Sue/Susan gasps and points somewhere over my shoulder. Harvey and I crane our necks about to see.

There they are.

I draw in a deep, rattling breath, which nearly sets me off into a coughing fit. Harvey – refreshingly – is speechless. A ripple of silence floats across the patio until even the clink of cutlery ceases. I can hear nothing but my own ragged breathing. And the hum. But I can ignore that for the time being.

They begin to move among us, bare feet slapping lightly upon the patio stones, lithe fingers grazing white tablecloths, exposed torsos glowing with health, rippling with muscles just beneath the tight, smooth skin.

There are gods among us.

My breath falters. I start to blink uncontrollably. Several sobs burst out, and Sue/Susan has tears streaming down both cheeks, unnoticed. Even Harvey is affected: the hand resting on the tablecloth is shaking.

Several of them have passed-by now, and my head swings around to track them, without conscious thought. My eyes follow the lines of their shoulders, down to their backsides, and further, all the way to ankles that take my breath away.

“Can we... can we touch them?” Someone asks. The uniforms confer for a moment, checking their ‘pads.

“The subjects will begin to seek you out. When one or more of them do, you may... inspect them, within reason. Please, though – do not attempt to talk at them.” It’s several minutes before any of them converge on our table. Harvey is first. A subject approaches him, slowing to a halt in front of my paunchy roomie, and you can see it takes all of Harvey’s control not to paw at the being in front of him.

“It’s ok, you can do it,” I whisper, which breaks through to him. He blinks, and ever-so-slowly raises a hand to the subject’s torso. His palsied fingers come to rest on the most amazing six pack I’ve ever seen. The contrast of old flesh and new is heartbreaking. By the sounds I can hear from around me, I’m not the only one who feels that way. Harvey rubs his shaking hand across abs, moving to a pair of pecs so chiseled they could have been carved from marble. My cottage-mate can’t take it, though. He lifts his hand away, hiding his eyes behind it.

The subject cocks his head, looking at Harvey, but somehow through him too.

I look around, watching as subjects come together with each of us nearly-dead, mostly male-male or female-female, but there’s the odd mixed-gender joining too. Now Sue/Susan has been joined by one. She’s standing in front of it, cupping a pair of breasts that are silhouetted beneath a thin white shirt. Sensing me watching, she looks over, barking out a short laugh.

“I can’t remember when mine last felt like this. They’re actually pointing up, look at this, Robert!” I smile and nod, not sure what I’m actually feeling, though. This is unlike any experience I’ve had. I find my glass back in my hand, sipping flattened champagne and bitter orange juice. Turning, I come face-to-face with mine.

“Oh,” someone utters (oh, wait: that’s me). There’s fierce thumping from nearby (yep, that’s my heart), as I stare into those eyes. I’m moaning. Uncontrollably. How pathetic this behaviour must seem to them. But, those eyes! I don’t even want to look at the rest of him, so entranced I am with his dusty gaze. A tinkling crash comes from close by, and I feel a splash on my pant leg. Shit. I’ve dropped my drink.

The subject in front of me looks at the ground between us, at the creeping puddle of bubbly orange, and takes a small step.

“No!” I cry, as he puts his foot on some glass. I try to prevent him from standing there, but it’s like

pushing marble – warm marble. “No, no! Move your foot!” I’m attracting attention now, but not yet caring. I let myself down to my knees, grunting at the pain my old joints feel at so simple a motion. One of my quadriceps threatens to seize up, and I drive a fist into it to try and quell the traitorous muscle. My subject descends smoothly to the ground, sitting on his perfect posterior. One corner of his white linen shorts begins to wick up my spilled drink.

“Sir, we said no talking to the subjects.” A pair of creased pants and lace-less white shoes appears next to us.

“No! It’s... he stepped on some broken glass!” Corroborating my story are several drops of blood splashing into the spilled juice. My subject is inspecting the bottom of one foot, in which a small sliver of glass is clearly visible. He’s doing nothing about it though. “Should I pull it out?” Without waiting, I reach out with one hand, steadying it on the sole of his foot with three fingers, while using my thumb and forefinger to pry the offending shard out. A tiny, bright stream of blood follows, running off his foot onto the sticky ground. The subject and I both stare at it for a moment, then look into each other’s eyes.

#

We’ve taken the maglev tram back to our cottages. Enough excitement for one morning. I’m standing at the window in the common area, my eyes following the curve of the landscape as it rises up and out of view. I’m still

not sure if I find that claustrophobic or thrilling. It’s only my second time on a torus station. Harvey’s at the table, complaining about something, under the assumption I’m listening. Of course, part of me is, storing what I’m hearing away. That’s part of what I do, who I am. Was, I correct myself. Turning from the concave landscape, I shuffle over to where I’d left my coffee, sit across from Harvey, and let him carry on for a bit before interrupting.

“Why didn’t they want us to talk to them?”

“...tell you, Marilyn’s coffee wasn’t bitter like this stuff... what? What’s that?”

“The subjects. Why are we not supposed to talk to them?” Harvey pauses, his brows meeting above his broad nose. I hate how our noses never stop growing as we get older. I used to be told my own nose was aquiline. Nobody says that anymore. From the side, I look like a sallow, sick ostrich.

“You know,” Harvey starts in a voice startlingly free of criticism. “I was wondering that myself. Well, up until he found me, then...” I watch as my roomie goes away for a moment, in his mind, reliving that first touch. Finally, he blinks the memory away, blushing. I look away for a count of four breaths, before he clears his throat and continues. “I wonder if it taints them somehow. Maybe we have to keep them pure, before, well, before...” He trails off. I guess he’s uncertain how to put in words what comes next for us all, once we each finalize which subject we want. “Anyways, how about those bunch of blubberers in there, Robert – weeping and sobbing all

over the goddamn place?! You think they'd seen a miracle!"

"We were told to expect that, with the cerebral re-plasticization. I guess, for some of us, the symptoms haven't gone away yet. It's not their fault."

"Ridiculous. Waste of time, too, that replastic-whatever."

"You don't feel any different from this time last year?" I ask, thinking back to that regimen of pills, and the ridiculous helmet we had to wear three times per week.

"Robert – I tell you, my mind is still as lightning quick as it was out of college. Why do you think I was the top rated attorney for five decades in a row? Those... 'active scans' were a complete waste of time. Should have asked for a discount and skipped'em." He nods to emphasize his point, and I give the requisite dry chuckle.

Something catches my eye outside the window – a tram has slowed to a stop in front of our cottage. Half a minute later, a polite tap comes from the door. Harvey glares at it accusingly, not shifting his bulk. Apparently, Marilyn used to answer doors for him. I use the table's edge to take some of the weight off my knees as I push myself up, hobble over, and activate the door control. It slides open to reveal a well-groomed woman in the same company uniform I've come to recognize. I recognize her too. Denise is her name. She's the Chief Director of the program.

"Director. This is a surprise. To what do we owe the honour?"

"Mr. McCaul. The honour is mine, to have someone of your achievements, as part of our inaugural group of clients. May I enter?"

"Of course." I make room for her to pass by me, then follow her into the common area. I offer her my chair, but she refuses, indicating I should take my seat again.

"I understand there was an incident during the reception earlier today. You spoke to one of the candidates. And he was injured." I begin to stand again, but she waves me down. "I'm not assigning blame, Mr. McCaul. I'm simply stating what was reported to me. I want your rendition of the events."

"Surely you've seen what happened?" I say, too late to bite my tongue. I have no doubt that each and every angle on that patio is closely, perpetually monitored. The Director arches an eyebrow but stays mum. I need to remember she knows everything about us – present and past. But still she asks. So, I play her game. "Dropped my drink – couldn't help myself when it... he walked over to me. I tried to stop him from stepping on the glass, but..."

"Is he the one?"

"Beg your pardon?"

“Have you decided if he is your choice? Video from this morning indicates you’ve bonded already.”

“I see. Then, do I have much choice?”

“Of course you do, but if you choose another, we need to arrest any further bonding on this candidate’s part, to facilitate another client taking him on.” Next to us, Harvey clears his throat.

“I’m glad you stopped by, Miss...?” He trails off, and the Director glances at him without turning her head. “Now, I’d like to discuss my candidate. I want one with a bit more upper body musculature, you know? Mine looks a bit... well, feminine, I guess. And the eyes. They’re blue. Now, I know I mentioned I wanted hazel. My Marilyn had hazel eyes, you see. In case you weren’t aware, I’ve paid in full, and I expect...” Something has caught his eye over by the door. I peek around the director, who still hasn’t moved a centimeter, other than aiming those piercing irises of hers over at my roomie. Two company lab-types have slipped into our cottage, carrying cases. I’m piecing together why, when Denise saves me the trouble.

“Mr. McCaul. I must ask you. Did you wash your hands at the patio, or once you returned here, afterwards?” Her face remains expressionless, but I’ve worked with her type before. She’s not to be toyed with.

“Wiped them off on a cloth napkin at the table, but gave them a good wash when we got back. You’re welcome to have your guys check out the bathroom. I

suppose they’ll want to check my bags too, eh?” I point to where my bedroom is, and Denise nods to her lab-weenies.

“Hey, wait a minute! You think Robert’s stealing that thing’s blood? You can’t be serious! And you can’t just barge in here and rifle through Robert’s stuff. That’s a fourth amendment violation. Robert – don’t consent to anything, man!” Harvey’s up from his chair now, chest puffed out beneath his hideous t-shirt. I start to shake my head, but the Director gives me no time to reply.

“Mr. Trenton, please relax. We wouldn’t want you stressing yourself unnecessarily before the end.”

“Don’t you patronize me, Missy! I’ll have you before a review board so quick-”

“Mr. Trenton. I should remind you: we are not in the United States, nor are we on Earth. This station is the sole property of the Company, and subject to the rules laid out by the Board of Directors.”

“But international law...”

“We are extra-national.”

“The law of the sea?” Harvey was grasping now, and sputtering to boot.

“We’re in space, Mr. Trenton,” Denise says this deliberately, as if to a child. Turning to me, she added: “This shouldn’t take long. I thank you for your cooperation, Mr. McCaul.” I nod, but she’s already turned about and walking through the door.

“Preposterous! Does that woman have any idea how much money I’ve spent on this trip?”

“She knows,” I reply, watching the Director pass out of view along the narrow path. The lab techs finish their search several minutes later, turning up nothing. As I knew they would. If there is a spy on this station, intent on stealing the Company’s secrets, it’s not me.

#

We’re back on the patio, waiting to be called forth. We get to spend some more ‘bonding’ time with our subjects before... well, before the end. I’m next to a woman who is talking incessantly about the three females she’s narrowed her choice to. Luckily, there’s a dupe on her other side who made eye contact with her a couple minutes ago, and is now the primary audience of her monologue. I’m sipping on some tart, luke-warm lemonade, watching an old man at the next table over suffer through a spat of hallucinations. No doubt a side effect of re-plasticity, since most everyone else is politely ignoring him. He keeps muttering, “I’ve seen that before, I’ve seen that before,” under his breath.

My turn comes, and I’m led to a corridor off the patio, and halted before a closed door. Ridiculously, my heart is fluttering. I’m not entirely sure if it’s from nervousness, or simple cardiac failure.

“Mr. McCaul, are you well?” Asks one of the young lab types who’s accompanied me.

“No, my dear; I’m dying. That’s why I’m here,” I joke, though I don’t have the breath to pull off the proper tone. She stands there blinking, until her partner clears his throat and throws me an unimpressed look.

“Oh. I see,” she says, finally. “Alright. Now, we need to confirm, Sir, that you’re only interested in viewing the one potential subject?”

“Yes, yes,” I reply, impatient, now, to be away from these two. He’s waiting on the other side of the door.

“Ok. Remember, please: no talking, and no excessive touching at this time.”

“Right. That comes later, I guess,” I mutter, facing the door. It slides open, finally, to reveal a simple white room, with one chair, one naked subject, and a viewing port in one corner, no doubt for the ubiquitous observers who fill every nook of this station.

The chair and the viewport, I ignore. I have eyes only for the specimen standing before me. Without clothes on, I get the full impact of just how perfect he is. There’s no need to mention the obvious – he is endowed in ways I never was, even at my peak, many decades past. He faces me as I approach, meeting my eyes, while not quite seeing me. I’m close enough now, to smell his natural musk, to feel the heat emanating off of him. My hand raises of its own accord, and I’m about to touch him again, when spots begin to dance across my vision.

“Shit,” I say, under my breath. Apparently not far enough under, because an androgynous voice from above breaks through the spell I’m still under.

“Mr. McCaul? Is there a problem?”

“No! No problem!” I say through gritted teeth. I take two deep breaths, willing the spots away. When they finally do, he’s looking right at me – really seeing me now, or so it seems. “What are you wondering, behind those beautiful eyes?” The muscles around his eyes tighten, and he cocks his head slightly. A thought occurs to me. I move my face even closer to his and begin to whisper. “Can you understand me? Do you know what I’m saying?” He blinks at me. “Blink again. Go on – close your eyes, then open them.” He stares at me. Stares and stares. Until finally, he closes his eyes, pauses, then opens them. My heart starts to thump against my ribs. It could be a fluke. Coincidence.

“Mr. McCaul, remember: please do not address the subject.”

“Sorry! Sorry! Just muttering to myself! I’ll try to do it less!” But this is too thrilling to abandon. This contravenes everything I’ve been told about my naked friend here. “Can you... can you open your mouth for me?” He blinks. Does nothing for about five seconds. Then he opens it. Nice and wide. Glistening pearly whites inside. Not a cavity or stain to be seen. And the tongue ... well, the mere sight of that organ makes me dizzy for some reason. Sets the blood pounding against my veins.

“Mr. McCaul!” Comes the voice from above. Dammit, they’re onto me. Not much time left now.

“What’s your name?” I hiss quietly.

“Mr. McCaul, we’re going to have to ask you to move towards the door, please.”

“Come on, don’t freeze up on me now! What is your name?!”

“Mr. McCaul. Move away from the subject and leave the room. An official will be waiting for you in the corridor.” I’m growing impatient, and the spots in my vision have begun to blossom again

“What. Is. Your. Name?” And finally, he opens his mouth, even as the door behind me opens.

“Mr. McCaul. Your time is up.” It’s getting hard to hear now – the rushing sound of blood fills my ears, and the thumping in my chest reverberates throughout my head. But just as a hand closes on my shoulder, my subject – my naked Adonis – utters a single word.

“Flesh.”

#

I come-to in an unfamiliar bed. A uniformed attendant is doing... stuff. You know – the stuff they do to look busy when you’re in a hospital bed. When he sees I’ve awoken, he’s right there, talking softly, asking this and that.

“What happened?” My eyes trace an IV line from my arm to a suspended saline bag.

“You suffered a mild myocardial infarction, and lost consciousness. You’re stabilized now, nothing to worry about.” No, nothing at all, except I don’t recall any actual chest pain, or passing out, for that matter. Best not to mention that, though. No doubt they’re listening, even now. “When you are ready, Director Sorbonne wants to see you.”

“The director? Me?” Again? “When will she be here?”

“Oh, she won’t be here in person.” He points up to the monitor on the wall opposite my bed, currently showing scenes from within the torus. “She’ll contact you in a few minutes.” He leaves, and I lay waiting, feeling less like a privileged octogenarian client of an exclusive off-world organization, and more like an errant child outside the principal’s office.

Denise Sorbonne flickers into existence on the screen, looking down at me from what appears to be a well-appointed office overlooking a waterfall. Swanky. I clear my throat and try to look dignified as I lay propped on a pillow, wearing nothing but a hospital robe.

“Mr. McCaul. You are feeling better, I hope?”

“Yes, thank you. You didn’t need to check on me personally...”

“There’s something we need to discuss. A matter of some delicacy.”

“Look – I didn’t mean any harm by talking to him, I just...” I trail off, because the look she’s giving me is almost... amused.

“Every client talks to the subjects. We expect and understand that.”

“Then why...”

“We warn you not to, for imprinting reasons. Until you’ve chosen your candidate, each and every one of them needs to be... unadulterated. And even should that occur, well, they only have a limited brain, as you know. You cannot permanently harm them simply by talking.”

“Ah.” Yes, they’d told us about that. Each candidate possesses only the most rudimentary of brains – no more than brain stems, really; just enough to allow for proper accelerated development. No higher reasoning. No capacity to think, to feel, to understand, or... talk.

Flesh.

I blink the memory away.

“As it is, you only had contact with one subject, and I get the feeling you are... taken by him?”

“Oh, yes. Most definitely.”

“He is your choice, then?”

“My...” My choice. My subject. My candidate... my new body. That’s why we’re here, of course. Out of the old, into the new... An empty vessel in which to install our recently rejuvenated brains and carry on... an empty vessel who apparently knows his own name. I swallow. The Director is arching a painted eyebrow. “Y-yes. Yes, he’s my choice. Of course.”

“Excellent. Now, onto the other matter. Tell me all you know about Harvey Trenton.”

“Harvey?” This discussion is moving too quickly for my drugged, fuddled head. “He’s retired, like me. He’s cashed-in most of his retirement funds to get up here, like me. He’s about to die. Like me. What else is there to know?”

“Has he told you where he’s from?”

“Why is that important? You told us not to get to know our cottage-mates. But obviously, you expected us to, just as you expected us to talk to the... subjects. So, if I know where Harvey is from: so what?” I bristle, but the effect is no doubt dampened by the image of me, reclined, in ill-fitting starched pyjamas. I expect Denise to argue the point, but she surprises me by moving on to a different tack.

“Other than the scheduled events, has Mr. Trenton been gone from your cottage for any period of time?” We’ve been here a day and a night now, yet I have to rake my memory for the details. I wonder sometimes if

the re-plasticity hasn’t worked on me quite as it should. Which makes me wonder if I should mention it...

“Yes. Yesterday after supper. He asked me if I wanted to go for a walk, but I’m not as mobile as I used to be, and... Is Harvey ok? Where is he?”

“Did he say where he was walking to, last night?”

“No, I...”

“Did you happen to watch which direction he headed?”

“No, I... I’m not sure I’m going to say anymore, until you let me know what this is about.” We share a digitized stare – I’m better at it than Denise is; decades of practice are on my side. Finally, she blinks, and gives in.

“In the excitement of having the ambulatory staff come to take you to the clinic, Mr. Trenton has gone missing. We are becoming a bit concerned for his well-being.” Statements like this come across better if you show some emotion; Denise hasn’t quite mastered this yet, it appears. But it’s not for me to comment. I’m more intrigued by the possibility that she’s lying. Probability, actually; I’d stake the final day-and-a-half of my life on it.

“Well, I don’t know what to say, Director. I want to help any way I can, but I’m afraid I don’t have much to offer. Surely, you have this whole station monitored. Harvey’s in good shape; sound mind, too. He’ll turn up.”

“I sincerely hope so. Thank you for your time, Mr. McCaul.” Her image blinks off, replaced by more lovely scenery.

I lay back and close my eyes, savouring a few shallow, painless breaths. The analgesics they must be dripping into me were top-rate, clearly. My serenity lasts only a moment, though. I realize I’m hearing that damn hum again, and then I’m annoyed. I came here to die and be reborn, not to get involved in some human drama or Company conspiracy. That type of business was best left to a Robert from thirty years ago. “Just one more day,” I mutter, “then I can get back to living again.” I look around for a button or switch to call the attendant, and press it repeatedly and mercilessly until three of them come rushing in.

“Ah. Hello there. I’ll be leaving now. I wonder if you could help me with my things?”

#

Back on the patio. Simulated evening on the station. Nice little breeze. Lights twinkle against the dark backdrop of the curved ‘ground’ up to either side of where we sit. I’m at a table with Sue/Susan again. There’s an empty seat beside me. I suffer a couple minutes of being fawned over, until my sour mood drives off even the most sympathetic of old dears. Now, we’re listening to a young woman summarize the procedure that’s about to take place for us in a little under twenty-four hours. It’s hard to stay grumpy while she talks about it. To be honest, I’m a

giddy school girl inside. I even forget about... oops. Spoke too soon.

“I’m very sorry to interrupt, ladies and gentlemen,” says Denise, striding to where our presenter stands, caught half-way through a phrase. “I’m afraid we have some sad news to report. As some of you already know, one of your fellow clients – a Mr. Trenton – went missing earlier. One of our staff has found him. It appears Mr. Trenton wandered off the designated trails and had a fall. He suffered serious injuries to his head and back. We were not able to save him.” Gasps and sobs rose about me as people looked to one another in shock. I have eyes only for the Director, however. She gazes back at me, face relaxed, fingers intertwined loosely in front of her. It’s my turn to give in, and look away. It wasn’t just one woman I was staring down, I realize, belatedly. It’s the whole bloody Company. There’s a twisting in my belly, and my sweater-vest isn’t keeping me warm any longer. Denise allows the lot of us another moment before continuing.

“I know this will be hard to accept for some of you. Mr. Trenton sacrificed as much as each of you in coming here, and was equally aware of the risk – of the consequence in following the re-plasticity treatments.” Yep: it rejuvenates our minds at the cost of our already-depleted, decaying bodies. Of course, she’s blaming Harvey’s death on a side effect of the treatment. Smooth move, Denise. “The timelines are tight, by necessity. Too tight for Mr. Trenton, I’m afraid.” The murmur builds

again for about twenty seconds. As it dies down, Director Sorbonne looks ready to deliver her coup de grace.

“I understand some of you have not yet made a final decision on your candidates. In light of this unfortunate event, I can’t stress enough the importance of doing so now. The sooner we can get each of you through the procedure, the less chance there is of another... accident.” It’s loud now – a patio full of sheep bleating in fear. Her job done, Denise pivots and marches off, to be replaced by a small army of staff, who descend upon us, to confirm final arrangements. One young man approaches me, and I wave him off.

“Already made my pick, son.” He approaches nonetheless and places a data pad on the table in front of me.

“Mr. McCaul. These are your final instructions. You’ll sleep for the rest of the night, then a team will be by in the morning to pick you up. Do you have any questions?” I glance around me and squint. Something’s off. Can’t put my finger on it though. Painkillers must still have my senses dulled. Or maybe it’s the damn re-plasticity.

“Ah, no. No. I don’t think so.”

“Take these instructions back to your cottage and read them carefully.” He’s leaning in close to me. Closer than a detached clinician should. He slides the ‘pad towards me with two fingers. And then I see it. Old folk are rising out of their chairs and being led away. But not

one of them are carrying a ‘pad. I shoot a glance at my tender, and we both drop our eyes to the thin device before me. I grab it and shove it into my sweater pocket.

“Help me up, young man. These knees are all but useless.” He guides me to the tram that’s waiting to take us back to the cottages, not saying another word. I hobble to a free seat and turn to watch him as the train glides away with a whoosh.

“Isn’t this so exciting?!” Says a tiny dried-up fruit of a woman sitting next to me. I grunt and feel for the thin rectangular ‘pad under the wool.

#

I’m not in my cottage. I’m in the last place I thought I’d be tonight: the hub. Gravity is almost nil here, and boy – does it feel good on my joints. Can’t say the same for my head, though. The hum here is amplified and sounds more metallic. Near impossible to tune out. Plus my face feels puffy and hot. The young man hovering across from me looks about how I feel, plus a great deal more impatient, too. Yep – it’s the same guy who handed me the ‘pad on the patio, now gently bobbing across from me in some dark maintenance corridor. See, I was at my cottage, but another tram arrived for me shortly thereafter, as the instructions on the ‘pad said it would. Instructions that lured me here, to the centre of this giant wheel in space. Lured me with the only bait that could have worked: four little words. <I know about Flesh...>

“Harvey didn’t have an accident,” I open with, not wanting to go through some tedious cloak-and-dagger repartee.

“No,” my nameless tender replies. He’s playing his cards pretty close, I see. I wonder if I should be as well. It’s not as if I’ve done anything wrong. Ah... but, the Company may interpret things differently, mightn’t they? I’m pretty sure midnight meetings in the hub were not mentioned on our tour package.

“Why did you get me involved? I want nothing to do with this. Not even sure why I came...”

“I know who you are, Robert. I know who you used to work for. I need your help.”

“I’m retired. This is the beginning of my new life! Why would I want to jeopardize it?”

“Because you heard him speak. Didn’t you?”

“How...” Argh. Never mind. Of course he knows. Everybody knows everything here. Except for me. How ironic that knowing everything used to be my in job-description. “What connection do you have to Harvey?” He hesitates, and I wobble towards him aggressively. Well, I try to make it look aggressive.

“He and I were... associates.”

“You’re lawyers?”

“No, of course not.”

“Ah. You’re spies then. The Director was right to be a bit paranoid. You’re looking to steal their code.”

“No!” He splutters for a moment, shaking his head. “I’m not a spy, working for some rival company. I’m with Interpol, Robert.”

“Oh.” That’s unexpected. “Why... oh. You know how they can talk.” It’s coming together now – old habits kicking in, making connections, seeing patterns. “The subjects have full-sized brains, don’t they? They’re just like you and me.”

“Yes,” Interpol replies with a bit too much fervour.

“They undergo accelerated growth, without any type of education or language training, but are otherwise ‘normal’ human beings?” I’m on a roll now.

“Yes,” he confirms again, quivering.

“You’re a mole. And you’re here to build a case against them? Human trafficking, or crimes-against-humanity, or something of the sort? Am I right?”

“Yeah. You got a real knack for this.” He shakes his head, which is enough to gently twist his feet about, so low is the ‘gravity’ up here (or down here? How the hell do they decide what’s up and down on a torus station anyway?). “My superiors should have contracted you instead of that loudmouth Peters.”

“Peters? You mean Harvey.”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Look - they got to him, obviously. I don’t know if he told them anything before he died, but if he did, my cover could be compromised. I need to act quickly: I need your help.”

“With what?”

“You need to go through with the procedure, then report back to my supervisors on Earth. I’ll be leaving in a day or so; I’ll meet you there, in our offices in Lyon.”

“But...” And here is the clincher. “How can I go through with it, now I know what they are?”

“You have to. We need proof. Real, physical proof. You’ll be it.”

“I don’t know...”

“If you do this, we won’t prosecute you for your crime; otherwise...”

“Crime?! What crime? I haven’t so much as jaywalked in fifteen years!”

“You’re about to. You’re about to kill a human being so you can inhabit his body.”

“But they’re not...!” I’m buzzing. Buzzing in sync with that damn station hum. My Interpol friend is smirking. But only for an instant. There’s a popping sound from down the corridor, and suddenly, he’s wrapped in a net. That wipes his smirk away. An instant later, each thread of the netting erupts into expanding foam.

Interpol cries out, twisting this way and that in mid-air swatting at the bubbly mix that is slowly enveloping him. I try to back away hastily, but I’m unaccustomed to moving in low-g, and my netted friend bumps into me. I push at him with one hand, which gets coated in the guck. The two of us separate in slow-motion. The foam is starting to sting, and I unconsciously wipe it on my sweater. Instead of removing it, however, my hand is now stuck to my clothing. The foam is already curing. I’m guessing that, when it cures, it won’t be too good for my undercover friend. The stinging increases, even as the foam constricts about my hand. It’s tighter than the tightest handshake I’ve ever had, when two largish fellows reach us.

“Mr. McCaul, the less you struggle, the less it will hurt,” the smaller of the pair says as he coasts over to us. They’re wearing the same company shirt and pants as Interpol (who’s floating just above the floor), but are each sporting a utility belt as well. The larger of the two is gripping the barrel of a type of firearm I’ve not seen before – likely the foam net launcher – while guiding himself with his other hand.

“It’s really starting to hurt!” I say through gritted teeth. The constrictive pain is becoming so severe that I’m worried about my poor old...” There’s a crack and a yell. Both emanating from me. A bone inside my hand has snapped. And the constriction continues to get worse. “When does it stop?!”

“Aiiiee!” Interpol shrieks, as a triple-snap emanates from somewhere about his person. Another two quickly follow.

“You have to stop this!” I say, my voice pitched quite a bit higher than normal. I feel my thumb come out of its joint, and a sob bursts out from my chest. “This is inhumane! Stop! Please!” A deep crack rocks Interpol’s body then, centred on his back. He stops squirming after that. Stops moaning too. His body settles gently to the deck and moves no more. The three of us stare at the immobile form for several seconds, then Small-guy pulls out a thin spray canister from his belt and extends the can towards my hand. I don’t even care what it might be for; I rip my crushed appendage away from my sweater and push it out to meet him. The first spurt slices the hardening foam into spaghetti strips, which wave about in the low gravity. Another few sprays, and the last of the foam sloughs away from my skin, easy as that. Meanwhile, Large-guy has pulled out a ‘pad and is talking to someone on its little screen. It’s a voice I’ve come to know too well these past forty-eight hours.

“The Director wants to talk to you,” Large-guy says, flipping the little device at me with practiced ease. It strikes me in the belly, and I fumble for it with my unmangled left hand as the ‘pad rebounds. When I right her image, she’s closed her eyes, and is facing off screen.

“Denise?” I croak out, my voice hoarse from shrieking seconds earlier. Oh, and I’m done with honorifics too. She’s not.

“Mr. McCaul,” her eyes open and she looks at me through the screen. “I can’t say I’m surprised to find you here. Not with your reputation. Nevertheless, would you care to explain yourself?”

“Of course. As soon as you agree to reciprocate. You’ve been keeping some things from us. Stuff we had a right to know.” She says nothing for a moment. Probably wondering how much I know. I begin to wonder if I’ve been stupid to shoot off my mouth, here in this deserted corridor. Just me and my two burly friends.

“Ok,” I start, tired of the games, and in no small amount of pain. “Here’s what happened. This fellow on the floor here hands me a ‘pad with instructions to meet him here. I’d never met the boy before, but it seems my late cottage-mate has. You were right to be suspicious of someone in our cottage – you just suspected the wrong man.”

“Should I not now be suspicious of you?”

“Me? Let’s talk about the suspicions I have about you for a moment, shall we? About the true nature of the subjects.”

“They are fully formed humans. Is that what you want to hear?”

“No, Denise, it’s not. I want to hear that they are adult humans with nothing but reptile brains keeping them going, until they become hosts for us. That’s what I signed up for. That’s what I paid you for.”

“Well, you of all people should know the truth is rarely what people need to know.”

“Yes. You’re right.” I’m quaking inside, I realize. I’m more nervous than I’ve been in decades. Not good for my ticker – it’s falling over itself trying to keep up to the adrenaline that no doubt has flooded my system. “So... what now? Do you get your boys to spray me with more lovely foam?” I toss my chin towards Interpol. Poor kid.

“Of course not, Mr. McCaul! You’re a paid customer. He was a traitor and a thief.”

“I expect his employers, and most of Earth, would see it differently.”

“We’re not on Earth.”

“I’m increasingly aware of that, Denise.” I pause. Even with my decades of experience, I feel out of my league here. I take several shuddering breaths before continuing. “So what now?”

“Well. You’ve put us in quite a difficult position, of course. Had you simply reported the agent to us, instead of engaging in his subterfuge, you would have secured our trust, and been none the wiser.”

“But I wouldn’t have known the truth!”

“Truth – like beauty, Mr. McCaul – is often in the eye of the beholder. Regardless of what you think you know, the procedure is safe, and humane.”

“But they’re...!”

“Enough. We’ve each invested far too much into this venture to be sidetracked now – you and us both. Your group will show Earth that immortality is possible. Once we demonstrate it; once we can come out in the open with the procedure, there will be nothing people won’t do to get a piece of it. However, we all have to be of one voice. Are you with us, Mr. McCaul?”

“I...” I swallow, trying desperately to think of something that will buy me time. But Larger- and Smaller-guy are looking impatient, and Denise is giving me pursed lips through the tiny monitor. “I... look, I can’t go through with it. Not now that I know.”

“Oh. I see. Well, I wish you had told us that before your accident.”

“My...” I fooled myself into thinking I was already at full fight-flight mode. A wave of cold pounds through me, and I swear – my heart comes to a complete stop for a full second. “No,” I say, but no sound emerges. My knees tap onto the ground. Thank goodness for the low gravity up here, or it would have been two smashed kneecaps right there. Large-guy has snatched the ‘pad back, but I can hear Denise passing on instructions.

“Earl – you take him to the shaft and push him down. Leonard, collect him at the bottom.”

“No! I...” Large-guy grabs me by my busted hand, which effectively cuts off my resistance. He quite casually drags me along the corridor, my legs flailing

behind me, my left hand grasping at anything to arrest my motion. We reach a hatch that opens to reveal... well, another corridor, I guess, only this one runs the full length of the spoke. I'm blubbing and slapping at my captor, as he swings me forward towards the edge. "Wait, wait! You don't want this on your conscience, do you?!" Large-guy – Earl – merely shrugs and grunts. His eyes hold no emotion. I've known men like this before. I truly have no hope. He lets my hand go, but I've grabbed on to a pack of wires with the other. Maybe I can pull myself up and away from him. I'm a babe in his arms, though: he grabs my left forearm with both hands, casually bringing it down over his knee. I let loose a shuddering cry, looking through tears at my wrist and hand dangling at near ninety degrees to the rest of my arm. Breaking my arm tosses him off balance, but he pulls it together more quickly than I do. He braces himself with one hand, then pounds me in the head with the other. I don't feel any pain – just a black-out sensation, my inner ears telling me I've begun to spin. Something snatches at my leg, and I'm brought back to him, defenseless. I think how nice it would be to be able to spit in this guy's face, but he lifts a foot and slams it into my chest before I can collect any saliva. And down I go.

It's slow at first. I instinctively reach out to stop myself, but my hands are destroyed, aren't they? The most I do is smack the back of my right hand against some protruding metal, which elicits no more than a quiet whimper from me. I'm slowly accelerating as I drop through the spoke. My legs are kicking as if I'm in water,

and I'm looking down, wondering how much further it will be. I could survive this, I think to myself, but the thought is ten seconds old already, and I'm travelling that much faster. So this is how it ends. I wanted to die in my sleep. Or just instantly somehow, without knowing it was coming. But this is quite possibly the most horrible way to die – my last living moment, seeing my end approach. Peripherally, I'm aware of the buzz modulating to a background hum once again. And then there it is. The bottom. I'm falling quite fast now.

This will hurt.

#

White.

Everything is white, and bright. But it's quite cool, and – oh yes – there's the hum, which tells me this is probably not heaven. OH! And pain! It hits me, jerking me completely free of sweet oblivion. Pain from every corner of my being, crying at me in dissonance. Above the din of my pain, I sense murmuring, and my head twitches to the side of its own accord. Who else would it be but Denise? Standing there in conversation with some nameless uniform. The uniform senses my awakening and juts his chin in my direction. When Denise has caught sight of me, she waves him off; he nods and backs away.

"You survived," she says, barely concealing the curl of her lip. I want to throw back some saucy remark,

but the pain. The pain. A shudder runs through me. It's hard to focus with my body in ruins. "It appears luck is on your side, Mr. McCaul – luck your friend Mr. Trenton lacked." She pauses, during which I'd say something else, if I could. "Now, what do we do with you?" Finally, I find my voice.

"Are you going to kill me?"

"Kill you? No. Not now. You've proven yourself to be quite resilient. Or lucky. Perhaps a bit of both, I think... I think I'd like to let you live. But you have presented us with a problem."

"I want to go home. I won't tell anybody about what you're doing up here. I'm not interested in those games anymore."

"You're not going home. But I want to give you another choice. Go through with the procedure..." I immediately shake my head (bad idea – the sound of crunching vertebrae resounds throughout my body). She clicks her tongue and reaches out to a machine next to me. I realize I'm attached to it. "Or I turn this off. We are not a hospital, and these resources will be in high demand shortly, as your fellow clients undergo their own procedures." I blink. Blinking doesn't hurt. Before I can respond, a uniformed attendant arrives, leading a naked man by the arm. It's him, of course.

"Damn you," I breathe, averting my gaze. I have to give it to Denise: her timing is impeccable. "I..." Unwittingly, my gaze flicks back to him. Flesh. "Flesh," I

say out loud. His eyes find mine. I swear he recognizes me.

"Yes. This flesh is yours, Mr. McCaul. Paid in full. We'll put you in him, and you'll stay with us. Up here. You'll be kept in utmost comfort. And we'll make very good use of your legendary skills, of course. I don't expect we'll have any more trouble with spies or saboteurs, with you here to help us."

"I told you – I'm done with that. I wanted a new life: a new identity, a new future." Denise squints at me, considering something.

"There's nothing new about it," she mutters. And I realize for the first time how... young she looks, for a director.

"You've done it," I say, my voice no louder than hers now. Her expression hardens.

"Take what I'm offering, Mr. McCaul."

"Or?"

"Or you die. On this bed. A truly shameful waste." I let my eyes return to Flesh. He looks at me, at my broken shell, spread out on this bed. He's beautiful. He could become... me. But he's already someone! I swallow – or try to; I can't trigger the reflex anymore. This body is done for. It'll die soon. With or without me in it.

Am I brave enough to die for his sake? Or am I strong enough to kill him for mine? I squeeze my eyes shut tight.

“I can’t... I...” But it’s this or nothing. Denise is right: there won’t be a new life, just a new body. I’ll still be who I was... and I was the best. No space station will hold me. No Chief Director can silence me. A smile splits my old face; the gears of my rejuvenated mind spin up.

“...Actually, I think maybe I can,” I conclude, opening my eyes towards Flesh.

I nod. And so does he.

