

Shed Skin

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“I’m sorry,” said Mr. Shiozaki, as he leaned back in his swivel chair and looked at the middle-aged white man with the graying temples, “but there’s nothing I can do for you.”

“But I’ve changed my mind,” said the man. He was getting red in the face as the conversation went on. “I want out of this deal.”

“You can’t change your mind,” said Shiozaki. “You’ve *moved* your mind.”

The man’s voice had taken on a plaintive tone, although he was clearly trying to suppress it. “I didn’t think it would be like this.”

Shiozaki sighed. “Our psychological counselors and our lawyers went over the entire procedure and all the ramifications with Mr. Rathburn beforehand. It’s what he wanted.”

“But I don’t want it anymore.”

“You don’t have any say in the matter.”

The white man placed a hand on the table. The hand was flat, the fingers splayed, but it was nonetheless full of tension. “Look,” he said, “I demand to see—to see the other me. I’ll explain it to him. He’ll understand. He’ll agree that we should rescind the deal.”

Shiozaki shook his head. “We can’t do that. You know we can’t. That’s part of the agreement.”

“But—”

“No buts,” said Shiozaki. “That’s the way it *has* to be. No successor has *ever* come back here. They can’t. Your successor has to do everything possible to shut your existence out of his mind, so he can get on with *his* existence, and not worry about yours. Even if he wanted to come see you, we wouldn’t allow the visit.”

“You can’t treat me like this. It’s inhuman.”

“Get this through your skull,” said Shiozaki. “*You* are not human.”

“Yes, I am, damn it. If you—”

“If I prick you, do you not bleed?” said Shiozaki.

“Exactly! *I’m* the one who is flesh and blood. I’m the one who grew in my mother’s womb. I’m the one who is a descendant of thousands of generations of *Homo sapiens* and thousands of generations of *Homo erectus* and *Homo habilis* before that. This—this other me is just a machine, a robot, an android.”

“No, it’s not. It is George Rathburn. The one and only George Rathburn.”

“Then why do you call him ‘it’?”

“I’m not going to play semantic games with you,” said Shiozaki. “*He* is George Rathburn. You aren’t—not anymore.”

The man lifted his hand from the table and clenched his fist. “Yes, I am. I *am* George Rathburn.”

“No, you’re not. You’re just a skin. Just a shed skin.”

#

George Rathburn was slowly getting used to his new body. He’d spent six months in counseling preparing for the transference. They’d told him this replacement body wouldn’t feel like his old one, and they’d been right. Most people didn’t transfer until they were old, until they’d enjoyed as much biological physicality as they could—and until the ever-improving robotic technology was as good as it was going to get during their natural lifetimes.

After all, although the current robot bodies were superior in many ways to the slab-of-flab ones—how soon he’d adopted that term!—they still weren’t as physically sensitive.

Sex—the recreational act, if not the procreative one—was possible, but it wasn’t quite as good. Synapses were fully reproduced in the nano-gel of the new brain, but hormonal responses were faked by playing back memories of previous events. Oh, an orgasm was still an orgasm, still wonderful—but it wasn’t the unique, unpredictable experience of a real sexual climax. There was no need to ask, “Was it good for you?” for it was *always* good, always predictable, always exactly the same.

Still, there were compensations. George could now walk—or run, if he wanted to—for hours on end without feeling the slightest fatigue. And he’d dispensed with sleep. His daily memories were organized and sorted in a six-minute packing session every twenty-four hours; that was his only downtime.

Downtime. Funny that it had been the biological version of him that had been prone to downtime, while the electronic version was mostly free of it.

There were other changes, too. His proprioception—the sense of how his body and limbs were deployed at any given moment—was much sharper than it had previously been.

And his vision was more acute. He couldn't see into the infrared—that was technically possible, but so much of human cognition was based on the idea of darkness and light that to banish them with heat sensing had turned out to be bad psychologically. But his chromatic abilities had been extended in the other direction, and that let him see, among other things, bee purple, the color that often marked distinctive patterns on flower petals that human eyes—the old-fashioned kind of human eyes, that is—were blind to.

Hidden beauty revealed.

And an eternity to enjoy it.

#

“I demand to see a lawyer.”

Shiozaki was again facing the flesh-and-blood shell that had once housed George Rathburn, but the Japanese man's eyes seemed to be focused at infinity, as if looking right through him. “And how would you pay for this lawyer's services?” Shiozaki asked at last.

Rathburn—perhaps he couldn't use his name in speech, but no one could keep him from thinking it—opened his mouth to protest. He had money—lots of money. But, no, no, he'd signed all that away. His biometrics were meaningless; his retinal scans were no longer registered. Even if he could get out of this velvet prison and access one, no ATM in the world would dispense cash to him. Oh, there were plenty of stocks and bonds in his name ... but it wasn't *his* name anymore.

“There has to be something you can do to help me,” said Rathburn.

“Of course,” said Shiozaki. “I can assist you in any number of ways. Anything at all you need to be comfortable here.”

“But *only* here, right?”

“Exactly. You knew that—I'm sorry; *Mr. Rathburn* knew that when he chose this path for himself, and for you. You will spend the rest of your life here in Paradise Valley.”

Rathburn was silent for a time, then: “What if I agreed to accept your restrictions? What if I agreed *not* to present myself as George Rathburn? Could I leave here then?”

“You *aren't* George Rathburn. Regardless, we can't allow you to have any outside contact.” Shiozaki was quiet for a few moments, and then, in a softer tone, he said, “Look, why make things difficult for yourself? Mr. Rathburn provided very generously for you. You will live a life of luxury here. You can access any books you might want, any movies. You've seen our recreation center, and you must admit it's fabulous. And our sex-workers are the best-looking on the planet. Think of this as the

longest, most-pleasant vacation you've ever had."

"Except it doesn't end until I die," said Rathburn.

Shiozaki said nothing.

Rathburn exhaled noisily. "You're about to tell me that I'm already dead, aren't you? And so I shouldn't think of this as a prison; I should think of this as heaven."

Shiozaki opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again without saying anything. Rathburn knew that the administrator couldn't even give him that comfort. He wasn't dead—nor would he be, even when this discarded biological container, here, in Paradise Valley, finally ceased to function. No, George Rathburn lived on, a duplicated version of this consciousness in an almost indestructible, virtually immortal robot body, out in the real world.

#

"Hey there, G.R.," said the black man with the long gray beard. "Join me?"

Rathburn—the Rathburn made out of carbon, that is—had entered Paradise Valley's dining hall. The man with the beard had already been served his lunch: a lobster tail, garlic mashed potatoes, a glass of the finest Chardonnay. The food here was exquisite.

"Hi, Dat," Rathburn said, nodding. He envied the bearded man. His name, before he'd transferred his consciousness into a robot, had been Darius Allan Thompson, so his initials, the only version of his birth name allowed to be used here, made a nice little word—almost as good as having a real name. Rathburn took a seat at the same table. One of the ever-solicitous servers—young, female (for this table of straight men), beautiful—was already at hand, and G.R. ordered a glass of champagne. It wasn't a special occasion—nothing was ever special in Paradise Valley—but any pleasure was available to those, like him and Dat, on the Platinum Plus maintenance plan.

"Why so long in the face, G.R.?" asked Dat.

"I don't like it here."

Dat admired the *derrière* of the departing server, and took a sip of his wine. "What's not to like?"

"You used to be a lawyer, didn't you? Back on the outside?"

"I still *am* a lawyer on the outside," said Dat.

G.R. frowned, but decided not to press the point. "Can you answer some questions for me?"

"Sure. What do you want to know?"

#

G.R. entered Paradise Valley's "hospital." He thought of the name as being in quotation marks, since a real hospital was a place you were supposed to go to only temporarily for healing. But most of those who had uploaded their consciousness, who had shed their skins, were elderly. And when their discarded shells checked into the hospital, it was to die. But G.R. was only forty-five. With proper

medical treatment, and some good luck, he had a fair chance of seeing one hundred.

G.R. went into the waiting room. He'd watched for two weeks now, and knew the schedule, knew that little Lilly Ng—slight, Vietnamese, fifty—would be the doctor on duty. She, like Shiozaki, was staff—a real person who got to go home, to the real world, at night.

After a short time, the receptionist said the time-honored words: “The doctor will see you now.”

G.R. walked into the green-walled examination room. Ng was looking down at a datapad. “GR-7,” she said, reading his serial number. Of course, he wasn't the only one with the initials G.R. in Paradise Valley, and so he had to share what faint echo of a name he still possessed with several other people. She looked at him, her gray eyebrows raised, waiting for him to confirm that that was indeed who he was.

“That's me,” said G.R., “but you can call me George.”

“No,” said Ng. “I cannot.” She said it in a firm but gentle tone; presumably, she'd been down this road before with others. “What seems to be the problem?”

“I've got a skin tag in my left armpit,” he said. “I've had it for years, but it's started to get sensitive. It hurts when I apply roll-on deodorant, and it chafes as I move my arm.”

Ng frowned. “Take off your shirt, please.”

G.R. began undoing buttons. He actually had several skin tags, as well as a bunch of moles. He also had a hairy back, which he hated. One reason uploading his consciousness had initially seemed appealing was to divest himself of these dermal imperfections. The new golden robot body he'd selected—looking like a cross between the Oscar statuette and C-3PO—had no such cosmetic defects.

As soon as the shirt was off he lifted his left arm and let Ng examine his axilla.

“Hmm,” she said, peering at the skin tag. “It does look inflamed.”

G.R. had brutally pinched the little knob of skin an hour before, and had twisted it as much as he could in either direction.

Ng was now gently squeezing it between thumb and forefinger. G.R. had been prepared to suggest a treatment, but it would be better if she came up with the idea herself. After a moment, she obliged. “I can remove it for you, if you like.”

“If you think that's the right thing to do,” said G.R.

“Sure,” said Ng. “I'll give you a local anesthetic, clip it off, and cauterize the cut. No need for stitches.”

Clip it off? No! No, he needed her to use a scalpel, not surgical scissors. Damn it!

She crossed the room, prepared a syringe, and returned, injecting it directly into the skin tag. The needle going in was excruciating—for a few moments. And then there was no sensation at all.

“How's that?” she asked.

“Fine.”

Ng put on surgical gloves, opened a cupboard, and pulled out a small leather case. She placed it on the examination table G.R. was now perched on, and opened it. It contained surgical scissors, forceps, and—

They glinted beautifully under the lights from the ceiling.

A pair of scalpels, one with a short blade, the other with a longer one.

“All right,” said Ng, reaching in and extracting the scissors. “Here we go ...”

G.R. shot his right arm out, grabbing the long-bladed scalpel, and quickly swung it around, bringing it up and under Ng’s throat. Damn but the thing was sharp! He hadn’t meant to hurt her, but a shallow slit two centimeters long now welled crimson across where her Adam’s apple would have been had she been a man.

A small scream escaped from Ng, and G.R. quickly clamped his other hand over her mouth. He could feel her shaking.

“Do exactly as I say,” he said, “and you’ll walk out of this alive. Screw me over, and you’re dead.”

#

“Don’t worry,” said Detective Dan Lucerne to Mr. Shiozaki. “I’ve handled eight hostage situations over the years, and in every case, we’ve managed a peaceful solution. We’ll get your woman back.”

Shiozaki nodded then looked away, hiding his eyes from the detective. He should have recognized the signs in GR-7. If only he’d ordered him sedated, this never would have happened.

Lucerne gestured toward the vidphone. “Get the examination room on this thing,” he said.

Shiozaki reached over Lucerne’s shoulder and tapped out three numbers on the keypad. After a moment, the screen came to life, showing Ng’s hand pulling away from the camera at her end. As the hand withdrew, it was clear that G.R. still had the scalpel held to Ng’s neck.

“Hello,” said Lucerne. “My name is Detective Dan Lucerne. I’m here to help you.”

“You’re here to save Dr. Ng’s life,” said GR-7. “And if you do everything I want, you will.”

“All right,” said Lucerne. “What do you want, sir?”

“For starters, I want you to call me Mr. Rathburn.”

“Fine,” said Lucerne. “That’s fine, Mr. Rathburn.”

Lucerne was surprised to see the shed skin tremble in response. “Again,” GR-7 said, as if it were the sweetest sound he’d ever heard. “Say it again.”

“What can we do for you, Mr. Rathburn?”

“I want to talk to the robot version of me.”

Shiozaki reached over Lucerne’s shoulder again, pushing the mute button. “We can’t allow that.”

“Why not?” asked Lucerne.

“Our contract with the uploaded version specifies that there will never be any contact with the shed skin.”

“I’m not worried about fine print,” said Lucerne. “I’m trying to save a woman’s life.” He took the mute off. “Sorry about that, Mr. Rathburn.”

GR-7 nodded. “I see Mr. Shiozaki standing behind you. I’m sure he told you that what I wanted isn’t permitted.”

Lucerne didn’t look away from the screen, didn’t break the eye contact with the skin. “He did say that, yes. But he’s not in charge here. *I’m* not in charge here. It’s your show, Mr. Rathburn.”

Rathburn visibly relaxed. Lucerne could see him back the scalpel off a bit from Ng’s neck. “That’s more like it,” he said. “All right. All right. I don’t want to kill Dr. Ng—but I will unless you bring the robot version of me here within three hours.” He spoke out of the side of his mouth to Ng. “Break the connection.”

A terrified-looking Ng reached her arm forward, her pale hand and simple gold wedding ring filling the field of view.

And the screen went dead.

#

George Rathburn—the silicon version—was sitting in the dark, wood-paneled living room of his large Victorian-style country house. Not that he had to sit; he never grew tired anymore. Nor did he really need his chairs to be padded. But folding his metal body into the seat still felt like the natural thing to do.

Knowing that, barring accidents, he was now going to live virtually forever, Rathburn figured he should tackle something big and ambitious, like *War and Peace* or *Ulysses*. But, well, there would always be time for that later. Instead, he downloaded the latest Buck Doheney mystery novel into his datapad, and began to read.

He’d only gotten halfway through the second screenful of text when the datapad beeped, signaling an incoming call.

Rathburn thought about just letting the pad record a message. Already, after only a few weeks of immortality, nothing seemed particularly urgent. Still, it might be Kathryn. He’d met her at the training center, while they were both getting used to their robot bodies, and to their immortality. Ironically, she’d been eighty-two before she’d uploaded; in his now-discarded flesh-and-blood shell, George Rathburn would never have had a relationship with a woman so much older than he was. But now that they were both in artificial bodies—his gold, hers a lustrous bronze—they were well on the way to a full-fledged romance.

The pad beeped again, and Rathburn touched the ANSWER icon—no need to use a stylus anymore; his synthetic fingers didn’t secrete oils that would leave a mark on the screen.

Rathburn had that strange feeling he'd experienced once or twice since uploading—the feeling of deep surprise that would have been accompanied by his old heart skipping a beat. “Mr. Shiozaki?” he said. “I didn't expect to ever see you again.”

“I'm sorry to have to bother you, George, but we've—well, we've got an emergency. Your old body has taken a hostage here in Paradise Valley.”

“What? My God ...”

“He's saying he will kill the woman if we don't let him talk to you.”

George wanted to do the right thing, but ...

But he'd spent weeks now trying to forget that another version of him still existed. “I—um—I *guess* it'd be okay if you put him on.”

Shiozaki shook his head. “No. He won't take a phone call. He says you have to come here in person.”

“But ... but you said ...”

“I know what we told you during counseling, but, dammit, George, a woman's life is at stake. You might be immortal now, but she isn't.”

Rathburn thought for another few seconds, then: “All right. All right. I can be there in a couple of hours.”

#

The robot-bodied George Rathburn was shocked by what he was seeing on the vidphone in Shiozaki's office. It was him—just as he remembered himself. His soft, fragile body; his graying temples; his receding hairline; his nose that he'd always thought was too large.

But it was him doing something he never could have imagined doing—holding a surgical blade to a woman's throat.

Detective Lucerne spoke toward the phone's pickups. “Okay,” he said. “He's here. The other you is here.”

On the screen, Rathburn could see his shed skin's eyes go wide as they beheld what he'd become. Of course, that version of him had selected the golden body—but it had only been an empty shell then, with no inner workings. “Well, well, well,” said G.R. “Welcome, brother.”

Rathburn didn't trust his synthesized voice, so he simply nodded.

“Come on down to the hospital,” said G.R. “Go to the observation gallery above the operating theater; I'll go to the operating theater itself. We'll be able to see each other—and we'll be able to talk, man to man.”

#

“Hello,” said Rathburn. He was standing on his golden legs, staring through the angled sheet of glass that overlooked the operating room.

“Hello,” said GR-7, looking up. “Before we go any further, I need you to prove that you are who you say you are. Sorry about this, but, well, it could be *anyone* inside that robot.”

“It’s me,” said Rathburn.

“No. At best it’s one of us. But I’ve got to be sure.”

“So ask me a question.”

GR-7 was clearly prepared for this. “The first girl to ever give us a blowjob.”

“Carrie,” said Rathburn, at once. “At the soccer field.”

GR-7 smiled. “Good to see you, brother.”

Rathburn was silent for a few moments. He swiveled his head on noiseless, frictionless bearings, looking briefly at Lucerne’s face, visible on a vidphone out of view of the observation window. Then he turned back to his shed skin. “I, ah, I understand you want to be called George.”

“That’s right.”

But Rathburn shook his head. “We—you and I, when we were one—shared exactly the same opinion about this matter. We wanted to live forever. And that can’t be done in a biological body. You *know* that.”

“It can’t be done *yet* in a biological body. But I’m only 45. Who knows what technology will be available in the rest of our—of *my*—lifetime?”

Rathburn no longer breathed—so he could no longer sigh. But he moved his steel shoulders while feeling the emotion that used to produce a sigh. “You know why we chose to transfer early. You have a genetic predisposition to fatal strokes. But I don’t have that—George Rathburn doesn’t have that anymore. *You* might check out any day now, and if we hadn’t transferred our consciousness into this body, there would have been no immortality for us.”

“But we didn’t *transfer* consciousness,” said GR-7. “We *copied* consciousness—bit for bit, synapse for synapse. You’re a copy. *I’m* the original.”

“Not as a matter of law,” said Rathburn. “You—the biological you—signed the contract that authorized the transfer of personhood. You signed it with the same hand you’re using to hold that scalpel to Dr. Ng’s throat.”

“But I’ve changed my mind.”

“You don’t have a mind *to* change. The software we called the mind of George Rathburn—the only legal version of it—has been transferred from the hardware of your biological brain to the hardware of our new body’s nano-gel CPU.” The robotic Rathburn paused. “By rights, as in any transfer of software, the original should have been destroyed.”

GR-7 frowned. “Except that society wouldn’t allow for that, any more than it would allow for physician-assisted suicide. It’s illegal to terminate a source body, even after the brain has been transferred.”

“Exactly,” said Rathburn, nodding his robotic head. “And you have to activate the replacement before the source dies, or else the court will determine that there’s been no continuity of personhood and dispose of the assets. Death may not be certain anymore, but taxes certainly are.”

Rathburn had hoped GR-7 would laugh at that, hoped that a bridge could be built between them. But GR-7 simply said, “So I’m stuck here.”

“I’d hardly call it ‘stuck,’” said Rathburn. “Paradise Valley is a little piece of heaven here on Earth. Why not just enjoy it, until you really do go to heaven?”

“I *hate* it here,” said GR-7. He paused. “Look, I accept that by the current wording of the law, I have no legal standing. All right, then. I can’t make them nullify the transfer—but *you* can. You are a person in the eyes of the law; you can do this.”

“But I don’t want to do it. I like being immortal.”

“But *I* don’t like being a prisoner.”

“It’s not me that’s changed,” said the android. “It’s you. Think about what you’re doing. We were never violent. We would never dream of taking a hostage, of holding a knife to someone’s throat, of frightening a woman half to death. You’re the one who has changed.”

But the skin shook his head. “Nonsense. We’d just never been in such desperate circumstances before. Desperate circumstances make one do desperate things. The fact that you can’t conceive of us doing this means that you’re a *flawed* copy. This—this transfer process isn’t ready for prime time yet. You should nullify the copy and let me, the original, go on with your—with our—life.”

It was now the robotic Rathburn’s turn to shake his head. “Look, you must realize that this can’t ever work—that even if I were to sign some paper that transferred our legal status back to you, there are witnesses here to testify that I’d been coerced into signing it. It would have no legal value.”

“You think you can outsmart me?” said GR-7. “I *am* you. Of course I know that.”

“Good. Then let that woman go.”

“You’re not thinking,” said GR-7. “Or at least you’re not thinking hard enough. Come on, this is *me* you’re talking to. You must know I’d have a better plan than that.”

“I don’t see”

“You mean you don’t want to see. Think, Copy of George. Think.”

“I still don’t ...” The robotic Rathburn trailed off. “Oh. No, no, you can’t expect me to do that.”

“Yes, I do,” said GR-7.

“But ...”

“But what?” The skin moved his free hand—the one not holding the scalpel—in a sweeping gesture. “It’s a simple proposition. Kill yourself, and your rights of personhood will default back to me. You’re correct that, right now, I’m not a person under the law—meaning I can’t be charged with a crime. So I don’t have to worry about going to jail for anything I do now. Oh, they might try—but I’ll

ultimately get off, because if I don't, the court will have to admit that not just me, but all of us here in Paradise Valley are still human beings, with human rights."

"What you're asking is impossible."

"What I'm asking is the only thing that makes sense. I talked to a friend who used to be a lawyer. The personhood rights *will* revert if the original is still alive, but the uploaded version isn't. I'm sure no one ever intended the law to be used for this purpose; I'm told it was designed to allow product-liability suits if the robot brain failed shortly after transfer. But regardless, if you kill yourself, *I* get to go back to being a free human." GR-7 paused for a moment. "So what's it going to be? Your pseudolife, or the real flesh-and-blood life of this woman?"

"George ..." said the robot mouth. "Please."

But the biological George shook his head. "If you really believe that you, as a copy of me, are more real than the original that still exists—if you really believe that you have a soul, just like this woman does, inside your robotic frame—then there's no particular reason why you should sacrifice yourself for Dr. Ng here. But if, down deep, you're thinking that I'm correct, that she really is alive, and you're not, then you'll do the right thing." He pressed the scalpel's blade in slightly, drawing blood again. "What's it going to be?"

#

George Rathburn had returned to Shiozaki's office, and Detective Lucerne was doing his best to persuade the robot-housed mind to agree to GR-7's terms.

"Not in a million years," said Rathburn, "and, believe me, I intend to be around that long."

"But another copy of you can be made," said Lucerne.

"But it won't be *me*—this me."

"But that woman, Dr. Ng: she's got a husband, three daughters ..."

"I'm not insensitive to that, Detective," said Rathburn, pacing back and forth on his golden mechanical legs. "But let me put it to you another way. Say this is 1875, in the southern US. The Civil War is over, blacks in theory have the same legal status as whites. But a white man is being held hostage, and he'll only be let go if a black man agrees to sacrifice himself in the white man's place. See the parallel? Despite all the courtroom wrangling that was done to make uploaded life able to maintain the legal status, the personhood, of the original, you're asking me to set that aside, and reaffirm what the whites in the south felt they knew all along: that, all legal mumbo-jumbo to the contrary, a black man is worth less than a white man. Well, I won't do that. I wouldn't affirm that racist position, and I'll be damned if I'll affirm the modern equivalent: that a silicon-based person is worth less than a carbon-based person."

"I'll be damned," repeated Lucerne, imitating Rathburn's synthesized voice. He let the comment hang in the air, waiting to see if Rathburn would respond to it.

And Rathburn couldn't resist. "Yes, I know there are those who would say I *can't* be damned—because whatever it is that constitutes the human soul isn't recorded during the transference process. That's the gist of it, isn't it? The argument that I'm not really human comes down to a theological assertion: I can't be human, because I have no soul. But I tell you this, Detective Lucerne: I feel every bit as alive—and every bit as spiritual—as I did before the transfer. I'm convinced that I *do* have a soul, or a divine spark, or an *élan vital*, or whatever you want to call it. My life in this particular packaging of it is *not* worth one iota less than Dr. Ng's, or anyone else's."

Lucerne was quiet for a time, considering. "But what about the other you? You're willing to stand here and tell me that that version—the original, flesh-and-blood version—is *not* human anymore. And you would have that distinction by legal fiat, just as blacks were denied human rights in the old south."

"There's a difference," said Rathburn. "There's a big difference. That version of me—the one holding Dr. Ng hostage—agreed of its own free will, without any coercion whatsoever, to that very proposition. He—*it*—agreed that it would no longer be human, once the transfer into the robot body was completed."

"But he doesn't want it to be that way anymore."

"Tough. It's not the first contract that he—that *I*—signed in my life that I later regretted. But simple regret isn't reason enough to get out of a legally valid transaction." Rathburn shook his robotic head. "No, I'm sorry. I refuse. Believe me, I wish more than anything that you could save Dr. Ng—but you're going to have to find another way to do it. There's too much at stake here for *my* people—for uploaded humans—to let me make any other decision."

#

"All right," Lucerne finally said to the robotic Rathburn, "I give up. If we can't do it the easy way, we're going to have to do it the hard way. It's a good thing the old Rathburn wants to see the new Rathburn directly. Having him in that operating room while you're in the overlooking observation gallery will be perfect for sneaking a sharpshooter in."

Rathburn felt as though his eyes should go wide, but of course they did not. "You're going to shoot him?"

"You've left us no other choice. Standard procedure is to give the hostage-taker everything he wants, get the hostage back, then go after the criminal. But the only thing he wants is for you to be dead—and you're not willing to cooperate. So we're going to take him out."

"You'll use a tranquilizer, won't you?"

Lucerne snorted. "On a man holding a knife to a woman's throat? We need something that will turn him off like a light, before he's got time to react. And the best way to do that is a bullet to the head or chest."

"But ... but I don't want you to kill him."

Lucerne made an even louder snort. “By your logic, he’s not alive anyway.”

“Yes, but ...”

“But what? You willing to give him what he wants?”

“I can’t. Surely you can see that.”

Lucerne shrugged. “Too bad. I was looking forward to being able to quip ‘Goodbye, Mr. Chips.’”

“Damn you,” said Rathburn. “Don’t you see that it’s because of that sort of attitude that I *can’t* allow this precedent?”

Lucerne made no reply, and after a time Rathburn continued. “Can’t we fake my death somehow? Just enough for you to get Ng back to safety?”

Lucerne shook his head. “GR-7 demanded proof that it was really you inside that tin can. I don’t think he can be easily fooled. But you know him better than anyone else. Could you be fooled?”

Rathburn tipped his mechanical head down. “No. No, I’m sure he’ll demand positive proof.”

“Then we’re back to the sharpshooter.”

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Rathburn walked into the observation gallery, his golden feet making soft metallic clangs as they touched the hard, tiled floor. He looked through the angled glass, down at the operating room below. The slab-of-flab version of himself had Dr. Ng tied up now, her hands and feet bound with surgical tape. She couldn’t get away, but he no longer had to constantly hold the scalpel to her throat. GR-7 was standing up, and she was next to him, leaning against the operating table.

The angled window continued down to within a half-meter of the floor. Crouching below its sill was Conrad Burloak, the sharpshooter, in a gray uniform, holding a black rifle. A small transmitter had been inserted in Rathburn’s camera hardware, copying everything his glass eyes were seeing onto a datapad Burloak had with him.

In ideal circumstances, Burloak had said, he liked to shoot for the head, but here he was going to have to fire through the plate-glass window, and that might deflect the bullet slightly. So he was going to aim for the center of the torso, a bigger target. As soon as the datapad showed a clean line-of-fire at G.R., Burloak would pop up and blow him away.

“Hello, George,” said the robotic Rathburn. There was an open intercom between the observation gallery and the operating theater below.

“All right,” said the fleshy one. “Let’s get this over with. Open the access panel to your nano-gel braincase, and ...”

But GR-7 trailed off, seeing that the robotic Rathburn was shaking his head. “I’m sorry, George. I’m not going to deactivate myself.”

“You prefer to see Dr. Ng die?”

Rathburn could shut off his visual input, the equivalent of closing his eyes. He did that just now for a moment, presumably much to the chagrin of the sharpshooter studying the datapad. “Believe me, George, the last thing I want to do is see anyone die.”

He reactivated his eyes. He’d thought he’d been suitably ironic but, of course, the other him had the same mind. GR-7, perhaps suspecting that something was up, had moved Dr. Ng so that she was now standing between himself and the glass,

“Don’t try anything funny,” said the skin. “I’ve got nothing to lose.”

Rathburn looked down on his former self—but only in the literal sense. He didn’t want to see this ... this man, this being, this thing, this entity, this whatever it was, hurt.

After all, even if the shed skin wasn’t a person in the cold eyes of the law, he surely still remembered that time he’d—*they’d*—almost drowned swimming at the cottage, and mom pulling him to shore while his arms flailed in panic. And he remembered his first day at junior-high school, when a gang of grade nines had beaten him up as initiation. And he remembered the incredible shock and sadness when he’d come home from his weekend job at the hardware store and found dad slumped over in his easy chair, dead from a stroke.

And that biological him must remember all the good things, too: hitting that home run clear over the fence in grade eight, after all the members of the opposing team had moved in close; his first kiss, at a party, playing spin the bottle; and his first romantic kiss, with Dana, her studded tongue sliding into his mouth; that *perfect* day in the Bahamas, with the most gorgeous sunset he’d ever seen.

Yes, this other him wasn’t just a backup, wasn’t just a repository of data. He knew all the same things, *felt* all the same things, and—

The sharpshooter had crawled several meters along the floor of the observation gallery, trying to get a clean angle at GR-7. Out of the corner of his robotic vision—which was as sharp at the peripheries as it was in the center—Rathburn saw the sharpshooter tense his muscles, and then—

And then Burloak leaped up, swinging his rifle, and—

And to his astonishment, Rathburn found the words “Look out, George!” emitting from his robotic mouth at a greatly amplified volume.

And just as the words came out, Burloak fired, and the window exploded into a thousand shards, and GR-7 spun around, grabbing Dr. Ng, swinging her in between himself and the sharpshooter, and the bullet hit, drilling a hole through the woman’s heart, and through the chest of the man behind her, and they both crumpled to the operating-room floor, and human blood flowed out of them, and the glass shards rained down upon them like robot tears.

#

And so, at last, there was no more ambiguity. There was only one George Rathburn—a single iteration of the consciousness that had first bloomed some forty-five years ago, now executing as code in

the nano-gel inside a robotic form.

George suspected that Shiozaki would try to cover up what had occurred back in Paradise Valley—at least the details. He'd have to admit that Dr. Ng had been killed by a skin, but doubtless Shiozaki would want to gloss over Rathburn's warning shout. After all, it would be bad for business if those about to shed got wind of the fact that the new versions still had empathy for the old ones.

But Detective Lucerne and his sharpshooter would want just the opposite: only by citing the robotic Rathburn's interference could they exonerate the sharpshooter from accidentally shooting the hostage.

But nothing could exonerate GR-7 from what he'd done, swinging that poor, frightened woman in front of himself as a shield ...

Rathburn sat down in his country house's living room. Despite his robotic body, he did feel weary—bone-weary—and needed the support of the chair.

He'd done the right thing, even if GR-7 hadn't; he knew that. Any other choice by him would have been devastating not just for himself, but also for Kathryn and every other uploaded consciousness. There really had been no alternative.

Immortality is grand. Immortality is great. As long as you have a clear conscience, that is. As long as you're not tortured by doubt, racked by depression, overcome with guilt.

That poor woman, Dr. Ng. She'd done nothing wrong, nothing at all.

And now she was dead.

And he—a version of him—had caused her to be killed.

GR-7's words replayed in Rathburn's memory. *We'd just never been in such desperate circumstances before.*

Perhaps that was true. But he was in desperate circumstances now.

And he'd found himself contemplating actions he never would have considered possible for him before.

That poor woman. That poor dead woman ...

It wasn't just GR-7's fault. It was *his* fault. Her death was a direct consequence of him wanting to live forever.

And he'd have to live with the guilt of that forever.

Unless ...

Desperate circumstances make one do desperate things.

He picked up the magnetic pistol—astonishing what things you could buy online these days. A proximity blast from it would destroy all recordings in nano-gel.

George Rathburn looked at the pistol, at its shiny, hard exterior.

And he placed the emitter against the side of his stainless-steel skull, and, after a few moments of

hesitation, his golden robotic finger contracted against the trigger.

What better way, after all, was there to prove that he was still human?

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