

SHADES OF NEWTON

Everyone thought of Anton Levinsky as a cruel man. He wasn't. No one knew him like I did. Not the nurses who bathed him and looked after his physical needs, not the doctors with their degrees, and certainly not his business partners. Each of these only saw a part of Anton, they never saw the whole. I was much more than a personal assistant to Anton Levinsky, I was a friend, perhaps his only one.

There are those of you who assume that meant something sexual, or something financial. You are wrong. At first I took notes, then as his health failed, I ran errands, but our relationship became more. We listened to music together, watched videos together, and confided to each other our deepest secrets. I knew him well and he knew me better than even my fiance. That is why, as the whole world is thrilled by his latest achievement, I alone cry. I know the price he has paid, and so does he.

Anton was a self-made man. His father died when Anton was quite young, and by twenty-one Anton was alone in the world. He worked long hours in shipyards and in the bad parts of the city to put himself through school. When people would ask how he could do that, so many hours and so little sleep, he had a simple answer: "because he had to." For Anton life was an exercise of will.

Becoming bedridden was a terrible curse life laid on him. He could not will himself well, he could not force his body to walk. All he could do was lie in bed and slowly get sicker, and each day come a little closer to death.

“I have a plan, Melanie,” he said that morning this whole terrible affair started. “I am not going to waste away in this damned bed.”

I didn’t answer him. I knew he was a stubborn man who believed that anything could be conquered. But there are things that simply can’t be beaten.

“Life is about choices.” He started in on his favorite rant. “The choices you make determine the life you have. That includes death. I have chosen not to die.”

“I didn’t know we had a choice in that,” I said, biting at the bait.

“I’m making the choice exist.” There was finality to his voice that told me this was not another debating game with him. Something big was going on. “You know I am serious, don’t you Melanie?”

“You’re serious about something.” I tried to sound as noncommittal as possible. His laughter filled the room as it had not done in years, and almost as quickly eroded into a violent coughing spasm.

“I have not lost my senses, girl.” He knew how much I hated being called girl.

“So don’t even think about calling in those fellows with those too tight jackets.”

I stayed silent, waiting for him to explain

“When the man from Dyantech arrives today, I want you to stay.”

Oh, this was something, I thought. Lately a rep from DyanTech had been making almost daily visits to Anton; they were the only business meetings I wasn’t

allowed to sit in on. No recorders, no notes, no records of any kind. Doc Graves had a fit on that first visit because Anton had even disconnected the medical monitors; but in any contest of stubbornness Anton always wins.

“Anton, what’s up?”

“I need you, Melaine. I can’t focus like I used to. You’re the only one whose judgement I can trust.”

“My judgment in what?” I was seriously confused. I certainly wasn’t a techie. If he thought the man from DyanTech was pulling a fast one, I wouldn’t be able to spot it.

“Your judgment of people. Can I trust these people with my life?”

My heart dropped to the floor and for the next few moments I forgot to breathe. I could tell when Anton was serious, and this was the most serious I had ever seen him.

“Anton, what are you getting yourself into?”

“Immortality.”

I was interrupted from asking more by the nurse coming and giving him one of his, many many, regular injections. Afterward he laid back and closed his eyes, his body radiating his exhaustion.

I moved quietly away from his bedside and started working on a number projects at my computer terminal. My hands went about the work without my brain noticing. I was stunned. From almost anyone else I would have dismissed that one word as fantasy, but not from Anton. He was not given to flights of

fantasy, not even in his choice of films. I dreaded whatever it was he had locked his jaws onto this time.

Philip Dodd arrived right on time, just as he had for the last six weeks. I could see his face react as the drugs and illness assaulted him. Even after six weeks of visiting Anton, Mr. Dodd had not adjusted to the smell of the place. I could also see Anton's reaction. Every flinch from Mr. Dodd reminded Anton just how much of an invalid he had become.

"Good afternoon." Dodd's business voice was smooth and practiced. I had the impression that he was a man adept at lying. "I do hope that you are not in too much discomfort today."

"Eighty-six the speech. We've got business to close." That was Anton's way, short and curt, I guess its why so many thought he was callous. Dodd sneaked a quick peek in my direction, and then focused his attention back on Anton.

"Ms. Carpenter will now be privy to everything," Anton told him flatly. His tone did not invite debate. With a quick jerk of his head, Anton signaled me to his bedside. I put on my best professional face and sat beside him.

Dodd came to a quick acceptance. From out of his case he produced a laptop and a state-of-the-art bug jammer. I had worked for Anton Levinsky long enough to recognize counter surveillance equipment when I saw it. Once Dodd was assured there were no other parties listening in, he started the holodisplay on the laptop.

"The GS-1178 android." Dodd slipped into his sales pitch too easily; I decided he wasn't someone I would trust in a dark corner of a party. "Biogenetic mus-

culature good for one hundred years, and a power supply good for twice that. This is the best unit available.”

“And totally legal,” I noted, looking at the bug-jammer.

“Very true Miss Carpenter.” Either Dodd was too stupid to notice the Ms., and if that was the case he wouldn’t be working for Anton, or he didn’t care. He was definitely not to be trusted.

“Have you secured the processor?” Anton asked. I could hear how tired he was already of Dodd.

“We acquired it at the start of the week.”

“When can we do the transfer? I can’t..” We didn’t hear what Anton couldn’t do, as a coughing spasm eradicated the rest of his sentence.

“The clinic in Anitgo will be ready next week. Doctor Joseph and his team are already setting up.” When I heard Joseph’s name it all clicked into place for me. I guess Anton saw the light bulb go on over my head.

“Yes Melanie, that’s my new body,” He said, pointing at the holodisplay of the android. In theory, the technology had existed for several years now, but no one had taken the leap yet. No one had attempted to copy their personality into a machine. Anton was rich enough, and desperate enough, to be the first.

“The ultimate in youth and vitality.” Dodd pitched his product still.

“Shut up!” I snapped and turned Anton to face me. “Do you realize the risks you are running? If anything goes wrong you’ll be worse than dead. You’ll be a vegetable.” I saw him flinch as I hit him with his worst fear; but his composure was back almost instantly. That was Anton, always in control.

“I’ll be dead in six months anyway. My death, if that is what this is, will be like my life, of my own making, my own free will.”

“Mr. Dodd, will you excuse us.” I said in my most pleasant, but commanding voice. The one Scott calls my dangerous voice. Dodd looked at me and, with those killer sales instincts, knew that now was not a time to speak.

“When did this crazy stunt jump into that feeble head?” I demanded as soon as the door was closed. Anton gripped the rails of his sick bed tightly and, pain etched on his face, pulled himself partially upright.

“Do you know who is in the room with us?” he demanded. Without waiting for an answer, he ranted on, “The Grim Reaper! He is standing there waiting to take me. Well I am making my own rules.”

“This is an insane risk, Anton.”

“My whole life has been risk. I have risked it all on one throw of the dice before; you know that Melanie! Now its time for one more big throw, but I’m going to need your help.” There was pleading in his voice, and that scared me most of all. Anton had never pleaded for anything in his life.

He collapsed back into the large pillows on his bed. He suddenly looked old, frail, and weak. What little was left of his white hair was almost invisible against the pillow. His cheeks were sunken and pale. A termor shuddered through his body. I had seen all these signs before, but now it was like I was seeing them for the first time. His breathing was shallow and so soft that I could hardly hear it over the hum of the medical monitors.

I relented as always. “What else can I do? You seemed to have planned everything out already.”

“I despise being vulnerable to strangers.” Anton has a habit of stating the obvious, “I need to know they are not going to slip in some nasty surprise.”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“I want to make sure I come out of this thing the same person I went in. I hate that I have to rely on programmers just to make my machines work, I can’t do this without them, but I don’t want to become a puppet to them.” Anton paused to breathe, his strength was getting weaker each day. As he rested, my mind began to grasp what he was talking about. The lure of re-writing the ‘programming’ of one of the most powerful men on the planet would be a hell of a temptation for anyone. The risk Anton had decided to run has suddenly become enormous. For Anton being a puppet would be a fate far worse than mere death.

“This is way beyond me Anton.” I said, “They could slip in the code and I would never know it wasn’t part of the procedure.”

“I don’t want you watching the code, watch the people. You have a talent for spotting the fakers and thieves, I’m trusting you can do it here too.”

“And if I say they might be doing something like that?”

“Then I’ll find another team.” He stated it as if he would find that team, not simply search. That was how it was with him, things either you made things happen or you didn’t.

“You know I don’t approve of this stunt.”

“I also know that you wouldn’t trust my well-being to someone else.” He was right about that. Anton had a way of getting what he wanted. He was simply too stubborn to not get it.

“Okay Anton, you win.”

“Thank you, Melanie. Now go and get Dodd to give you a run down on every aspect of the project. In a couple of days we’ll fly you down to Antigo and you can start evaluating the team.” With that, he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep. He even made himself sleep on command. I quietly rose from my chair and went to find Dodd.

I found him making moves on one of Anton’s nurses. I wondered what kind of woman his girlfriend was. I had no doubts that he had one, he was too smooth and practiced not to.

“Mr. Dodd, we have a lot of material to go over.” I’m not normally that abrupt with people, but I had already developed a dislike for him. I wanted to get through this as quickly as possible.

“Of course, Melaine,” he said taking me by the upper arm. “but please call me Philip.” His thumb ‘accidentally’ brushed across my breast. He was as slimy as I had expected.

“It’s Ms. Carptener,” I said, removing his hand from my arm. “I’d like to keep things on a professional level.” I guided him to a smaller room I used for dealing with Anton’s business partners. As we left the room, I caught a smirk on the face of the nurse. I flashed her a quick, knowing smile. Sometimes this game really does feel like us versus them.

Dodd sat down and before he had taken a breath, I lit into him.

“Mr. Dodd, understand this. I am the most important person in the world to you right now. One word from me and Mr. Levinsky will drop you.” He started to speak, but I could see it wasn’t acceptance. “This is not a point of debate. You have to satisfy me that this procedure is in Mr. Levinsky’s best interest, or it isn’t going to happen.”

I had learned to be tough long before I started working for Anton, but he had taught me how to put the edge in it. Dodd settled down like a good doggy and we spent the rest of the afternoon going over the organizational charts and personnel plans. I didn’t care about who swept the floor, I had to learn who would be in a position that would let him pull a fast one. By the end of the afternoon, I knew that I wasn’t going to learn it all in one sitting. I got copies of all the files, then gave Dodd a cold good-bye.

“Good night, Anton,” I said softly from his door.

“Come here, Mel.” His voice was soft, almost inaudible. I had to cross the room slowly, as the lights had already been lowered. Only the dim glow from the monitors guided my way. In the ghastly light from the CRTs, Anton looked worse than ever.

“Why?” he said.

“Why what?” He could have meant anything. When he calls me Mel, it’s a sign that all his walls are down. That he’s feeling something very strongly.

“Why are you so opposed to this? It’s the only chance I have.” He reached out and took my hand. His grip was weak. His skin felt thin, like tissue paper.

“Because this is what you are giving up,” I said, gripping his hand more strongly. “You are more than just a mind. After the transfer you are never going to feel the wind on your skin again. The simple warmth of a gentle hug, the tang of a really good steak.”

“I haven’t been allowed that for years.” He managed a smile.

“I know Anton, but have you really thought about what you will become? Servos and bio-engineered muscles? No smell, no taste. I don't know if it really is worth it.”

“I’ll lose all that in grave as well Mel.” A silence wrapped itself around us. Eventually Anton broke it. “Please tell me you’ll be there after it’s all done.”

“Is that what this twilight conversation is about? Afraid I’ll leave? You’re my boss and my friend; I’ll be here for you.” Anton smiled, closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

I got home late because the Ecos had tied up the freeways protesting the new photofuels. Someone figures out a fuel that burns cleaner and you don’t have to dig up half of Texas to get it, and people are still not satisfied.

I called in a pizza strike for Scott and myself. Afterwards we made love with a radio station accompaniment. Later as Scott slept, I cried, for everything Anton was losing, for the price I thought I understood. If I had known the full bill that night, I would have never stopped crying.

The next two days flew by in a blur. Dodd, even with his sexual sliminess, was harmless to Anton. Granted, Dodd would have sold his Mother for a cheap thrill, much less have one of the most powerful men in the world as his per-

sonal puppet, but he wasn't in a position to insert anything into the transfer. Frankly, I suspected that Dodd lacked the courage to do it was well. All the critical members of the team were in Antigo already. Now that I was up to speed on the process, I could head down and take a long hard look at them. Flying out on Friday was painful. Scott wasn't happy at all. He tried to hide it; but the poor dear is as transparent as a politician during re-election. I never like leaving Scott either, but my job often drags me around doing errands for Anton. My plane took off to the west, over the Pacific, and I got to see several Freeholder ships before we turned east for Antigo. I swear, they have always looked like frying pan lids to me. Still there is something very seductive about what they are doing. Chucking it all away to live on the open ocean. Away from the crime, the drugs, the whole madness this world has been falling into for fifty years. I know I'll never do it. I can't even meditate for more than fifteen minutes in a row; living for months at sea would certainly drive me buggy. But it does sound nice from time to time.

Antigo was nice. Even in the mid-twenty first century, life has a slower pace there. The facilities had been built into a wonderful old house. In one way it's a shame that all sorts of medical research has been banned in America, but if it hadn't been, I wouldn't have seen such a lovely island.

Doctor Casey Joseph met me on the wide screened, porch of the house. If you know anything about cybernetics, then you've heard of Doctor Joseph. Depending on your views, he is either this century's Frankenstein, or it's Jonas Salk.

“Melanie Carpenter.” He extended his hand in a strong professional grip, “Welcome to history.” There was neither sarcasm nor hyperbole in his voice. He knew exactly what he was doing.

“My scope is much smaller than that.” I replied. He took this well as we sat down.

“Of course, Your concern is Mr. Levinsky. No part of this facility is off limits to you.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.” But of course words counted for nothing. I have seen the gulf between promises and deeds before.

“I would be disappointed if it were.” I must have shot him a confused look, because he explained almost at once: “I’ve had a chance to get to know Mr. Levinsky the last few weeks. He doesn’t tolerate a causal approach to one’s work.”

“No, he doesn’t.”

The rest of the afternoon was spent watching the beach, talking about the procedure over light drinks. I noted that Doctor Joseph was a teetotaler. By the time the sun had slipped beneath the waves I felt I had a pretty good fix on the Doctor. He was neither Frankenstein or Salk. He was in some ways a complex man, not in this for his own personal gain. Not even for the gain of proving that he had done it. I think he felt that was doing simply what he had always been meant to do. So Doctor Joseph had a green light; now I had to meet his computer counter-part, Mitra Caspari. But after the plane flight and the long afternoon, I decided that she could wait until morning.

The morning was bright and the coffee had not yet taken effect when Mitra joined me at breakfast. She had that striking beauty that seems so common among Persian women. Black hair, large dark eyes and a complexion somewhere between olive and tan.

“I’m told you’re the person I have to waste my time with.” She certainly didn’t believe in wasting words or time.

“I’m not your enemy.” I said between bites of egg, “but I am the person who green lights or kills this project.”

“I’m the one who has to make to work, the software side at least.”

“One of three who can do it all.” I stated as factually as I could. I didn’t know if Mitra’s ire was genuinely from having her work disrupted, or her ego. I decided to play it carefully, “I’m not here to bring work to a stop, but I have to get to know what sort of people you are. And I can’t do that just by watching you punch code for hours on end.”

“What kind of person I am has no bearing on the project. What kind of software engineer I am does.”

“Mr. Levinsky has concerns that go beyond capability.” I tried to be diplomatic.

“His concerns are wholly capability.” She talked over me as I tried to respond,

”He’s undoubtedly concerned about someone getting the idea of altering his ‘native’ progaming.” She let the comment lie there while she poured herself some coffee. I decided she would continue in her own good time. I was right.

“Of course the idea occurred to me; and to several others on my staff. But we don’t know anywhere near enough to do it.” This time a pastry interrupted her

explanation. "This is the first time. We have a lot to learn about 'human programming' - if there is any such thing - before we can start writing it. It is a capability issue."

"If you don't understand it, how can you transfer it?" I baited.

She gave me that look that techs generally reserve for the really bad calls from customer support.

"Do you read Farsi?"

I shook my head. Grabbing a napkin, she quickly scrawled several Farsi characters on the flimsy paper. "Copy that."

"I get the point." I pushed my plate away from me, "Take a walk with me, please." I waited until I was sure she had accepted, then led her out to the beach.

No one could have mistaken us for sisters. My fair skin and light hair had no relation to her classical Persian features.

"So are we going to end up with two Levinskys?" I asked.

"No. We are either going to have one or none." Mitra said flatly. "The process of obtaining all the connecting patterns in his brain is also going to destroy those patterns. Either it works or he's dead."

"Or a vegetable," I added.

"There won't be enough left for even that." For the first time I saw that she really did feel the weight of her task. It's rare that a software person so clearly has a life on the line.

She was right. I spent two days talking to everyone else, but it was indeed a capability issue. I sent my report to Anton and waited for him to arrive.

He arrived in classic Anton style. Bossing everyone around him. The poor men carrying the gurney were harangued all the way from the airport to his room.

It's not that he is mean, but if he sees a better way of doing something he is not shy about telling you. It's the difference between self-centered and selfish. A selfish person doesn't care about your hurt feelings, a self-centered person simply isn't aware that he's hurt your feelings. Anton was self-centered. Imposing his will was his way, he wasn't capable of doing anything else.

I waited until the nurses and doctors had finished getting Anton settled in before going down to his room.

"About time you showed up." He barked as I came in.

"Don't take that tone with me. You need to learn patience."

"Only the young have time for it." He countered.

"And only the old the experience." Such banter was an old ritual with us, "How are you feeling?" I asked, switching gears on him.

"Horrible. The sooner we get this over with the better." He looked worse than when I had last seen him. He had lost weight, and he hadn't had any to spare.

He was a wraith in that bed, alive only because he wasn't yet ready to die. If health was created by will power he would have been an Olympian. I stayed with him until he fell asleep, I know how much he hates to travel; he hates strangers even more. Then I slipped out of his room and watched the sunset, wishing that Scott were here as well.

The medical alarm went off at 2:37 am. I was in Anton's room in a flash, just footsteps behind the doctors and nurses. I stayed in the back of the room, well practiced at being out of the way of emergency medical teams. His heart had stopped. The doctors were the best, and in the end their considerable skills were able to pull him back from death's door once again.

How I wish that they had failed.

Two days later, they wheeled him into the processing chamber. The process took twenty hours, and I was there for most of it. There wasn't a lot of light or anything like in the videos. It was just one very small, very old man on a table, a lot of sterile white equipment, and the android body that was to be Anton's new home. I stared at the two Anton's for quite some time. The one I had always known, old and grey. And the one I had only heard about, young tan and healthy. The android almost looked like a young Anton, but only almost.

When they were done, they removed the life-support equipment, and Anton's body died. I spent nearly all of that night crying.

The next two weeks marked Anton's long struggle back to our world. He later told me that this was the most terrifying experience he had ever suffered. He was awake and aware inside that mechanical body, but lost to us. He had no control. No idea how to move, how to speak, how to signal us in anyway that he was there.

For us it was a waiting game. Waiting for the tremors to stop. Waiting for the actions to become more definite, more controlled. Towards the end waiting for him to speak. His first words to me were classic Anton.

“I told you so.”

“I should have had them install some progaming for charm.” He was in a bed, not out of illness or weakness now, but simply because he still had not learned to stand.

“I have time to learn charm now.”

“But not the inclination.” I managed a strained smile. “So tell me, how do you feel? What is it like?”

He stopped cold. His expression went a little blank, like he was somewhere else for a second.

“It’s very bizarre,” he replied at last. “Without the hunger, the hormones, and a whole host of things I didn’t know were there, I feel more stable. I don’t think I have ever been more in control of myself.”

“That must make you happy. Now even your body can’t defy your will.”

“Why so snippish Melanie? You act like this isn’t an improvement.”

“I don’t know that it is. You are now in control of every aspect of yourself, but I can’t help but wonder if it’s the uncontrolled that makes life fun.” I hadn’t come to him today intending to get into this, I had really wanted to put on a good face, but this talk of total control had rubbed me the wrong way.

“I’m the same person, Mel.” He certainly didn’t looked the same now that he was young, tanned, and fit. “And I’m still calling the shots in my life. Only now I have more ways to call the shots in.”

“Yeah, you’re still the control freak.” I let the debate die, but something deep inside of me was feeling more unsettled. We spent the rest of the afternoon

watching videos, listening to music, and generally being more friends than boss and staff.

He laughed at the same bizarre humor that Anton had always found so appealing. He still sang along with those sappy songs I could scarcely stand. By late evening I had to admit that it all seemed to have worked. He had apparently found away to skip that whole business of dying.

It didn't take him long to learn to walk again, and in typical Anton fashion, he was running the same afternoon. Dr. Joseph was beaming, his blue eyes sparkled with his achievement. We didn't see much of Mitra; she was lost in the volumes of data the process had created, as happy as a tax man with a subpoena for a studio's books.

"I'll follow along in another week," Anton informed me as I packed for the trip home. "There are a few more tests to ensure that all my systems and subsystems are wearing as intended."

"Take your time. There are a pack of lawyers to deal with. You've just started a whole new area for lawyers to specialize in." There was plenty of work that I had to attend to, but despite the loveliness of the island, I was desperate to get home to my apartment and to Scott.

"No matter what the courts decide, this was what I needed."

I don't know if I could have been so unflappable in the face of losing my life-long fortune, but then I wasn't Anton.

Southern California was rainy and cold when I got home. The type of weather you never see in the ads. After a miserable soaking and uncomfortable taxi

ride, I was home at last. Scott was there, a lovely meal prepared, candles lit. It was a very happy home coming.

The call came two days later. The weather had broken, and I was sleeping soundly when the computer beeped, loudly. Scott, who could sleep through a nuclear attack, barely stirred as I started the video conferencing. Only Anton called me this way, for him to do this at three in the morning could only mean an emergency.

Antigo was several hours ahead of me, the sun was just coming up, giving a rosy glow to the scene. There was no rosy glow in Anton's face. There was terror on his face, a raw stark terror that I had never seen in him before.

"Mel!" He screamed as he leaned in towards the video pickup, his face distorting in the lens, "I know what I am!"

"Shouting." The rude awaking had made me less than diplomatic.

"I'm a machine! There is no ghost, only the machine." He looked as though he were on the verge of tears. Of course there would be no tears.

He tapped a forefinger on his head. "I can see my programming, Melanie! I can see it all!"

"You're not progaming, Anton. You're a man in a machine."

"You don't understand! Every action, every word, even these are just output from my programming. I can see it, I know exactly how my mind works. Its all so simple to me now."

"Anton..."

“Listen to me. I don’t have any control. None!” His face became a mask of torment. I wished I could turn away, “The world provides me with input, and my programming provides the output. I don’t have any choice, any free will in it at all!”

I had the most intense feeling that this was all a dream, that somehow I was going to wake up and find all this had never happened. But in my heart I knew that this was real, horribly real.

“I don’t have choice in what I do, what I say, how I live. I can’t even chose to die Mell! It’s all been taken away from me. I have nothing...” He did break down then, falling away from the video pickup, his sobs and heaves caring over the thousands of miles to me.

I switched off the computer and cried for a very long time.

The world cheers Anton’s victory over death, as he spends day after day in his clockwork hell. I wish I could free him from it, but there are things you can’t bring yourself to do, no matter how badly you want to.