

SHADES OF NEWTON

The monkey's name was Jim-Jim. I've never understood the fascination of naming apes with doubles names, Bo-Bo, Jo-Jo, and the like, but this one was stuck with Jim-Jim. Jim-Jim was just a dumb animal, with no idea of what was in store for him. Not like me, I thought I knew exactly what I was doing.

"As you can see, Jim-Jim has learned to master a fairly complex puzzle," Dr. Joseph lectured. I tried to ignore Dr. Joseph's patronizing manner and concentrate on the video. It wasn't easy. When you get old, everything starts to hurt, and when something doesn't hurt, you get scared. At least when it hurts, you know it's still there.

Displayed on the vid-cloth stuck to the wall, the little chimp that had been so happy at solving a puzzle was now terrified. Jim-Jim was strapped down to a metal slab that looked too much like a mortician's table for my tastes. He was secured so that he could move nothing more than a few inches, and his head was totally immobile.

"Naturally we did not tranquilize the specimen, as it would disrupt the deep scan of the subject's neural pathways."

"Is the process painful?" Mel, my private secretary, asked. She was a sweet girl, and a sharp one, but she didn't understand that no amount of pain would have been a deterrent for me.

"We think not. The brain itself has no pain receptors, but it will be interesting to discover exactly how the process felt to Mr. Levinsky." Dr. Joseph was a researcher totally lacking in bedside manner. But I hadn't hired him to hold my hand and tell me sweet fables.

"Don't worry about it, Mel," I said. "When this is done I won't be feeling any more pain. Not ever."

"There are two ways to look at that, Anton." She chided me.

On the video the chimp's head was now obscured by a smooth metal finish.

"How long does the sensor need to be in place?" I asked. Dr. Joseph waited while I took several deep breaths from my oxygen supply so that I could give him my full attention.

"For a Jim-Jim, the deep scan time was seven and a half hours. We have no data on humans naturally, but we expect the deep scan to take somewhere around twelve hours."

"How long did Jim-Jim remain conscious?" Again Mel was worried about comfort, but this time she mirrored my own questions.

"Four hours, twenty-seven minutes. After six hours it was necessary to engage the life support equipment." Dr. Joseph's answer was cool and practiced. Nothing sugar-coated, which was exactly the way I liked it. When

you make something easier for someone, you're doing them no favors, and usually quite a bit of harm.

The video jumped to the chimp being removed from the scanning device. Its eyes were open, but nothing looked out of them anymore. Its chest rose and fell, its heart continued to beat, but these were the actions of the life support. The chimp's body was dead, just like mine would be.

"Naturally a fully autonomous body was not constructed for this specimen." On the screen, Jim-Jim's new body was glistening in silver metal perfection. Power cables, data cables, and cables whose purpose I could only guess at were secured into the little android body.

"The specimen's neural pattern was imprinted on the Q-pathways of a dedicated system."

"How long did imprinting take?" I hated the idea of being helpless inside a computer. Maybe there and aware, but frozen while the rest of my brain downloaded.

"Imprinting, by its very nature, is quicker than the deep scan, Mr. Levinsky. It was a total of four hours and thirty-six minutes for this specimen."

"And again you have no data for a human transfer," Melanie reminded the doctor.

"Have you made more than one impression from this one specimen?" I asked. Dr. Joseph flinched, just a tiny bit, but I knew I had hit home with an unexpected question. For several long moments the only sound in my room

was the beeping of medical monitors, and the whirl of my own life support equipment.

"Yes. There appears to be no difference between the two impressions." I could see the Doctor bracing himself for a reprimand, or worse.

"I already knew that, doctor. After my transfer, the deep scan files will be destroyed."

"Of course." He was breathing easier. I wasn't really worried about the good doctor making additional copies of me. Multiple Anton Levinskys wouldn't profit him; other things might.

"The specimen required thirty-six hours to acquire motor control over his new body. After another twenty hours we recorded this test with the specimen." Clearly Joseph thought this would be the impressive climax of his presentation, but the outcome was so clearly evident it lacked any sense of drama. Had this test failed, we wouldn't have been watching the presentation at all. None the less, there was Jim-Jim, now living in a computer, controlling a body that was steel, composite fibers, and bio-engineered, all to solve a child's jig-saw puzzle.

"I have made all the final arrangement for my artificial body," I explained. "Everything is being prepared in Antigo, Doctor. I don't see any reason why we can't get started within a week."

"That's more than enough time for my team to ensure everything is ready." Joseph's career and fortune would be made or destroyed by the events of the next weeks. He faced it well.

"Okay, then. Get your team down there." I dismissed him without pleasantries. There was no time for such things, and I was far too tired to bother with being polite.

"Did you take a good look at Jim-Jim after the deep scan?" Mel asked after Dr. Joseph left my room.

"After the scan is unimportant." I didn't really feel like doing this fight again. Mel is a sharp girl, and someone I knew I could trust, but she was far too emotional.

"It will be important to you if the imprint doesn't take, and you end up trapped inside of that fried brain they'll leave you!" I had dodged senility, but I still had nightmares about it: my mind slipping away bit by bit. Mel had decided to stop fighting fair, this was her last ditch attempt to stop me.

"You're taking an awful risk," she said when I didn't take her bait about becoming a vegetable.

"It won't be my first." My head began to pound with announcement of a coming migraine.

"You're not risking your fortune, Anton. You're not even risking your life, but a whole hell of a lot more."

"There nothing more than life to risk, Mel. That is everything."

"What about your soul?" Her voice had suddenly gone very soft. Soft was not what Melanie was normally. After twelve years she still could surprise me. Was it ever possible to really know anyone as well as you knew yourself?

"I sold that when I got my law degree."

"I'm serious, Anton." Her tone indicated she was as serious as she would ever get. I shouldn't have joked about it. Mel didn't go around wearing her faith on her sleeve, but that didn't mean she took it lightly. I think it meant just the opposite. She didn't talk about it, because to her it was as factual and as real as the sunrise.

"I'm sorry, Mel. I'm not mocking your faith, you know I wouldn't do that." She settled down, because she knew I wasn't just giving her a line. That wasn't my style. "But I've never been sold on a mystical soul idea. I believe in me, and what I can make happen. The universe spent fifteen billion years to evolve me, what a waste to let all that vanish just because the flesh is weak."

"There's more to being human than chemical reactions, Anton. I'm terrified that when you're done with this, you won't be human anymore."

"Aside from dying, is there anything I can do or say to make you feel better about this?" I know she would have no answer to this, but I had no time to waste with her knees getting weak. And I hurt too much for this debate to drag on.

"That's not fair."

"Nothing is. Fair is a concept we invented, it's got nothing to do with how the universe is."

"Okay, but after this is done, I'm quitting." This was no threat, Mel was a lot like me that respect. She never made threats, and this statement wasn't made to try to change my mind. She was just letting me how it was going to be.

"I won't pretend to understand, Melanie, but I will respect your call." I closed my eyes and tapped a couple of times on my pain medication. Soon I would be feeling better, but my mind would be fogged. Useless. I felt her kiss me on the forehead. Lightly, with sense of loss that I could feel as indisputable as my pain.

"You never have listened to anyone but yourself, have you?" From someone else this might have sounded accusatory, but Mel knew me too well. It was true, I valued my independence above all things. I didn't tell others what to do with their lives, and I sure as hell didn't want anyone telling me what to do with mine.

"I need to talk to you in the morning, Mel. When I'm not flying on pain killers. Got a special job for you." I wanted to talk about it right then, but the cotton had already started to fill my head. Never make important decisions while upset, or intoxicated. Too many bad business deals had been sealed over drinks.

"Sure, Anton," she said, and then softly stepped out of the room. She was a good kid, smart and tougher than she thought she was. With a sharp eye for phonies and cheats. Business can be taught, but those sorts of instincts are precious.

The damned radio wouldn't stop beeping. I was trying to listen to a political talk show while I stood my midnight shift at the gas station, but all the radio would do was beep. Steady and solid like the metronome I used to help me sleep. Damn, the people of the shows were generally idiots, but I had to do

something to keep my brain engaged while I stood here in the middle of the night. Plus I was tired, and I couldn't fall asleep here. Forget getting fired, this was not the best section of town. Sleeping at the counter would just be begging for someone to do something. Full time work, full time college, it was wearing me down.

"Wake up, Mr. Levinsky," the nurse said gently. The life support equipment beeped in time with my heart. Replacing the radio I had been fighting with.

Oh, a dream. Those had been busy days. I don't think I had a dozen dates during college. I was far too busy making sure I wasn't ever going to be poor again. Love could wait. Somehow it always did.

"Here's your breakfast, sir." I fancied firing her for her patronizing tone, but quelled the impulse. I never fired people for being annoying, only for being stupid. The tray she set in front of me could not be said to contain food. It was mush, bland, and tasteless: old geezers' food. For years it had been mine.

"Take it away." I really couldn't stand the thought of eating it today. "I'm sick of the stuff."

"Dr. Graves is not going to like that, sir." She really had a talent for making the word 'sir' sound insulting.

"Do you really want to get into this?" I said. "You know who's going to win."

She sighed and lifted the tray back off from my bed.

"I had to try sir, the doctor expects it."

The rest of the morning routine was the usual dehumanizing ritual that the infirm are forced to endure. Bed pans and sponge baths, having your most basic needs taken from your control. If there is anything more humiliating, I don't know what it is.

Once they were done I was clean again, and as presentable as I could ever be, trapped in this bed. Melanie showed up shortly after, she never tried to see me before. She knew how important that was to me.

"So you had a secret mission for me?" Mel never asked how I was, or how I had slept. She knew, and didn't want to hear the answer.

"I brought you on late in this project." She knew what project I was talking about. Lately there was only one project. "And it's not because I didn't trust you."

"I know, Anton. But we can still get locked for this. It's as illegal now as when you started."

"But I waited until I was fairly sure we'd get away with it. No need to put a jail term on your resume." Damn scared cattle! Pleading about the sanctity of human life, the immortal soul. They're superstitious zealots, stomping on science as they had been for the last seven hundred years.

"So what don't I know?" she asked.

"It's what I don't know. I don't know these people who are going to do this procedure." I could see she was confused, but she held her questions while I inhaled deeply from my oxygen supply. "I know their names, and their

backgrounds, I can even tell you when they lost it, but I don't who they are, as people."

"You don't know if you can trust them," she said plainly. One of the many reasons Melaine remained a trusted assistant to me was that she always spoke plainly.

"I'm not worried about them failing on purpose, there's no gain in that for them. But I'm worried about them hacking into my mind."

"Altering the code of the imprint?"

"Exactly. The temptation to make one of the richest men in the world a puppet may be too strong for someone." I resisted the urge to tap for painkiller to take the edge off my fear. Now that I had voiced my fear, it seemed so much more real. Would I even know it? Or would I think that whatever had been programmed into me was my own free will, my own intentions?

"It's all way beyond me, Anton. You know I'm not a tech type. They could do it right in front of me and I wouldn't have a clue it was happening."

"I know, but you do know people. You can spot a slick better than anyone I know."

"Including you?" she joked.

"Yes." I wasn't joking. If she could keep her emotions in check, she had a bright future. "I want you to go down to Anitgo, poke your nose into things and talk to the people in charge of this. See if anything smells funny to you."

"I've never approved of this project, Anton. Are you sure you want to give me the power to kill it?"

"Yes. Because you're always been honest with me. You're not about to change now."

"Okay, I could use some tropical sun anyway. When do I leave?"

"This afternoon, after you pick up a few toys." I took another deep breath of oxygen, only to end up wasting most of it coughing. Just as I got breathing again, I caught the look of pity on her face. Hatred burned in me, brighter and hotter than any of my pains. To be so helpless that someone would look at with such pity hurt me more than any of my past wives or girlfriends ever did. I wasn't mad at Mel, no it wasn't her fault she wore her feelings on her face, I was mad at the damn universe.

"What toys?" She would never bring my weakness to my attention, she was too good for that.

"Surveillance. I want to watch you at work."

"Which is it, you want to second guess me or pure voyeurism?"

"Two heads are better than one." She simply looked at me. She knew there was more to it than that. "With the transfer so close, I can't concentrate on business. This is the only thing I can think about. I have to work on it or I'll go crazy just lying here."

"You already have, and I'm crazy for helping you."

"No, you're good for helping me." I was going reward her very well for her help, but I wasn't about to insult her by saying so.

"Okay, but they're not on when I'm home. Ruben and I aren't performing for your jollies." If I had had breath, I would have laughed, but all I could do was smile.

We spent the next several hours going over the project in detail. The project was huge, Dr. Joseph's team was nearly a hundred people. Luckily only a few of them were in any position to make the sort of changes I feared on their own. When we were done we had a very short list of people to get to know. And I was more terrified than ever.

This was my only chance to get control of my life back, and to get it I had to risk losing control of my mind. Nothing in my long life had scared me like that thought was doing.

Mel left to get the toys I was providing, and to say good-bye to her boyfriend. Ruben must be a very unusual man, but I don't think Mel would have settled for a mundane one. I tapped the dosimeter and gave myself more painkiller. Dr. Graves would likely mention it, but I didn't care. I hurt, and the day had been terribly long.

I dreamed of church, and of dad. I hadn't thought about either in decades. I know that sounds horrible, but my father died when I was only seven. He was more like a symbol to me than a real person. Church was real, mother had taken to the Baptist faith fairly seriously after dad died. I suppose it was her way of dealing it, but why did she have to saddle me with it too? As a child, the fire and brimstone hell had given me nightmares. As a teenager I saw it for what it was: a means of control. To keep the people in line. mother was

never happy that I rejected her faith. After I turned seventeen, I walked out on the church and her. I never saw either again.

Mel switched on her transmitter when she was just rolling down the runway. She knew how much I had loved flying, back in the dark ages, when I wasn't a prisoner of modern medicine. She was sitting in the right-hand seat of the corporate jet, giving me a wonderful view of the take-off. The jet just shot down that runway, I looked forward to piloting again. Hell, to doing anything again.

As the jet climbed above the Pacific, I got a glimpse of half-a-dozen Freeholder ships just off the coast. What a waste, the very best technology, self sufficient in power, food, water, and nearly so in equipment, all so they could run away from the world. The world is not made better by hiding from it, but from taking it on head on, making it into what you needed it to be. If you don't, someone else will.

Mel climbed out of the co-pilot's seat and headed back toward the main passenger cabin.

"Did that cheer you up, Anton?" She asked through the link. The video and audio were coming through perfectly. They should, I paid enough for them.

"Yes it did, just watch your hair, if it rides up all I see is blond."

"Never had a video in my headband before, you have to give me a learning curve." Then she cut the signal. She wasn't being curt, she just valued privacy as much as I did. But I think she valued it for very different reasons

than I did. I think she liked to find out who she was. I already knew who I was. I had no doubts about that.

It was a long flight over to the Atlantic, and then south to Antigo, I had nothing to do but be aware of just how frail I was. My fortune had long since become self-administering, so I was forced to lie there, waiting. God, how I hate waiting, especially at the end game.

It was evening when the vid-cloth came back to life. I had been napping, another thing I hate about being old is, how much more sleep robs you of the only thing you really have, time.

I came awake looking at a modestly large two-story house, framed with palm trees and a lovely night sky.

"Okay Anton," Me said over the link. "You can send me here as often as you want."

"Reminds me of a funeral home I once purchased."

"That's an unpleasant association," she responded as she climbed the steps to the large open porch. The door opened as she approached and a servant greeted her and took her luggage. I had spared nothing to make sure the only thing this team had to worry about was my project.

"Ms. Carpenter, welcome to Antigo and to history." Dr. Casey Joseph was given to grand statement, but since he could deliver I don't suppose you could really call it hyperbole.

Mel and Dr. Joseph had a late night coffee on the porch. She was being friendly and open, I don't think he really knew what Melanie was working at.

Joseph was a little different with Mel than he was with me, but that's to be expected. A man can tell himself a thousand times he has a professional relationship with a lovely woman, but she is still a lovely woman.

Mel finally said good night to Joseph and retired to her room. It was then that I spoke to her through the link.

"Let's talk about Dr. Joseph, while it's still fresh in your head."

"Fine, but I'm beat," she said around a yawn. She started to sit on her bed.

"No, go sit at the mirror so I see you as we talk," I suggested.

"But I'll be talking to myself."

"It's either that, or you talk to your headband."

She chose the mirror, and moved to the nightstand. I found myself looking at Mel projected, larger than life, on the vid-cloth. She really was a lovely girl, if you like the slender, blond and blue-eyed type. I wondered what sort of rumors were running around about her long association with me. People always assume that if a man's assistant is lovely, something more is going on. I can assure you, from experience, nothing destroys a productive working relationship faster.

"What's your opinion?" I asked.

"He's safe," she replied plainly.

"More concerned with achievement, than with theft?"

"Achievement is all that man really wants. I'd hate to be married to him."

"Perhaps that's why he's been married three times. I agree, I know his type. It's about making something happen, not scamming to get something." I stopped and let a coughing spasm take charge for a few moments. Hating every second of it.

"You should, you're the same," Mel said, having let me finish coughing.

"Tackle Mitra in the morning." I didn't need to say good night, she knew just how exhausting everything had gotten for me. I switched off the link and closed my eyes. Lord, I was tired. When I was that tired, death didn't seem too high price to pay for some real rest.

Mel and I had breakfast the next morning. Naturally I had the baby mush, while she had a lovely continental breakfast. I regretted that my new android body would not have senses like taste and smell. I was going to miss eating, but then I missed it now.

"Oh, she does not look happy." The view bounced as Mel watched Mitra Caspari burst onto the porch.

"I'm told you're the person I have to waste my time with." Mitra stood with arms akimbo, scowling intently.

"I'm the person who green-lights this project. If I'm a waste of your time, you're just going to have to learn to live with it." I wished I could have seen Mel's face. I was sure I knew the stubborn look she was wearing. She was a master of taking control, I think it was something she learned from me.

Mitra sat heavily into a chair and glowered. She recognized the futility of arguing, but she didn't have to like it. A servant flowed up silently, producing

coffee and a melon for Mitra. Mitra considered the breakfast skeptically, then took a sip of her coffee.

"I can't get my job done, chatting all day with you."

"I'm not here to stop your work," Mel replied. "But I have to get to know what kind of person you are. And I can't do that watching you punch code for hours on end."

"What kind of person I am has no bearing on this, all that matters is that I am the best neural-software engineer." Mitra sliced her melon with irritated vigor.

"Mr. Levinsky has concerns that go beyond capability."

"His concerns are wholly capability." Her eyes narrowed in challenge. To climb to the top of her field, especially in the Middle East, she must have been challenged a lot. She didn't give Mel a chance to reply, but launched right into her argument. "He's undoubtedly afraid of someone altering the deep-scan, to plant a back door into his mind, so to speak." Her look invited debate, but Mel didn't give her one. Mitra took a Danish from the pastry tray.

"Of course the idea occurred to me, and to several on my staff. But it can't be done. Not yet, we simply don't know enough about how the mind is programmed, if there is such a thing, to be able to alter it with predictable results." Mitra bit into the Danish with a flourish. For her the subject was officially closed.

"If you have the patterns from the deep-scan, why can't you change them then?"

Mitra winced at Mel's question. She ran her fingers through her thick black hair in gentle frustration.

"Ms. Carpenter, do you read Farsi?"

The field of view swung left to right several times as Mel shook her head. When the view steadied back down, I could see that Mitra had grabbed a napkin and was busy writing on it. She pushed the napkin over towards Mel.

The lovely flowing script of arabic style letters stood out in a blood red ink.

"Copy that," Mitra ordered.

"I get the point." Mel pushed the napkin aside. Mel stood and looked out to the beach not a hundred yards from the house.

"Take a walk with me," Mel said. Mitra glared, but didn't argue. She rose and followed Mel down to the surf.

Mel was kind to Mitra, and didn't keep her away from her networks and systems more than a couple of hours. It was clear that Mitra was convinced that she was right about the capability issue, so I switched off the link. I was too tired to watch much more, and my chest had been giving more pain than usual.

That night, we talked as we had the evening before, with Melanie looking into a mirror.

"There's a couple of more people I want to talk to." Mel was rubbing her neck as she spoke. "But I think Mitra nailed it down today. It's the people who are going to follow you in this who are going to have to worry."

"I agree." Coughing tore up my chest, ripping and burning like steel-etched fire.

"Are you well enough to travel?" Mel's eyes misted with concern. This wasn't a ploy to get me to stay home, she really cared.

"I'm too sick to not travel," I replied. "I don't have time to waste. I'll be down there tomorrow afternoon."

Without the vid-cloth on, my room was lit only by the night lights for the medical staff, eventually I was able to sleep.

"Be careful!" The jolt of the gurney hitting the airport tarmac had hurt worse than the first time I had broken my hip. The aide muttered some sort of apology, but I really wasn't interested. I know I am a hard man to work for, but that's because I expect the job done right, damn it!

"Are you going to leave me to broil in this sun?" The idiots had managed to unload me from the jet, but seemed to be running up their hourly pay in getting the associated medical equipment unloaded with me. The tropical sun was especially harsh, I hadn't been outside in more than three years, much less out in tropical heat.

"Anton," Mel cajoled from beside my gurney. "let them do their job."

"Only if they are going to do it right," If I had had the strength, I would have crossed my arms in a sulk. Melanie should understand my requirements for performance. She leaned over the stretcher and looked me straight in the eye.

"You're grouchy from a long flight, and a lot of pain. Shut up, and they'll be done a lot faster."

You know what I hate more than Mel being right? Be being wrong. I could have sulked some more, but I would have known the whole time that Mel had been right. If a man can't face facts, particularly when he is wrong, he's just a child. I shut up, and tapped my doseometer a single tap. A little painkiller wouldn't hurt, I didn't have any important decisions left anyway. The course was set, I should relax. But I've never been one to relax, maybe afterwards I could learn to.

I was feeling groggy and somewhat disconnected from the world by the time I was established in my suite. I knew there was pain, but the painkillers had separated me from it. It was something I was aware of, but couldn't feel. Frankly, this was a sensation I had never liked. I needed to be sharply aware of everything.

"Now that wasn't so bad, was it?" Mel sat regally next to the bed.

"Don't patronize me."

"Don't require it," she replied listlessly. A moment of silence hung between us, it stretched out heavy and somber.

"Do I look that bad, Mel? The trip was hard, but I made it."

"You look like a wraith." A single tear rolled down her left cheek. "I really don't know if all this is worth it." Another tear chased the first.

"It's better than dying." I closed my eyes, trying calm the sensation of the room spinning.

"I'm not sure of that, Anton." I could hear her voice, but it sounded hollow, like it was echoing down a long tube. "You know I won't stop you, almost as much as you do, I think people should be free to make their own stupid mistakes. But I am afraid for you. There is more to life than just intellect. There's your soul to consider."

"I don't have one, not an evolutionary advantage."

"I'm not joking about this, Anton." She sounded like she had moved from the room, but I knew she hadn't. I wanted to open my eyes and make sure, but it really didn't seem worth the effort.

"Too tired." I think it came out as a whisper, if it came out at all, because after that it was all dark and nothing. Just like how I thought death would be.

I don't know which woke me up, the pain radiating out of my chest and down my arm, or the shrill medical alarms screaming in my room. It wasn't my first heart attack, hell it wasn't my fourth, but it was a bad one. I had a vague sense of the medical team running into my room, and then nothing. I'm told it was the closest I had ever come to being declared dead.

Damn, I wish they had.

"How long?" I didn't have time to waste, couldn't anyone here see that!

"If we do this rushed, we botch it." Dr Joseph might as well have been carved from granite for all the flexibility he was showing.

"How long?"

"Thirty-six hours." Mitra was just as resolute as Dr. Joseph. "Perhaps longer if you keep summoning us here for trivia."

"Go." I laid my head back down on my pillow, my breath ragged and painful.

"You've got the best team, hell the only team that can do this, Anton, let them do it." Mel remained after Joseph and Mitra left. "Unless you've changed your mind?"

"You know better than that," I snapped, sharper than I intended.

"Monday night," I paused, not because I didn't trust Mel, but because admitting weakness is always a form of loss of control. "It scared me, more than any of my other health crises. To be right here, to have everything in place, if I die now it would be so stupid! All because I didn't move faster, earlier."

"Or because it wasn't meant to be," she suggested.

"There is no destiny, only our free will, Mel."

It was unnerving to have doctors wearing street clothes for such a vital procedure. Of course this wasn't a surgical operation, but years of scrubs and nurses' uniforms had conditioned me to accept white as what doctors wore when they worked.

"We will not administer any sedatives or narcotics." Dr. Joseph moved quickly about the room, examining readings on inscrutable devices and making equally alien adjustments. "The brain, of course, has no pain receptors, so the process itself should be painless."

Damn! how I hate that word, 'should'. It's a weak word used by those who don't know what they are expected know.

"We can't rule out that you may experience sensory illusions of some kind as the deep-scan progresses. So, to ensure the success of the operation, and for your own safety, we are going to restrain you."

Dr. Joseph smiled as he leaned over the gurney and fastened solid nylon straps across my body, arms and legs. His smile became a little forced as he secured my head into an equally immobile state.

"Good luck," he said, then took a step back. Melaine stepped up next to the gurney. Her eyes were red from crying, but her face was dry now.

"I'll be here for you, Anton." She didn't add, 'if this works', but I knew the thought was there. That phrase dominated the room like a silent partner who has gained control of all the cash.

She kissed me lightly on the cheek, a sisterly kiss, then took a seat at the far end of the room.

With a nod from Dr. Joseph, two men rolled the gurney away from the center of the room. My head slid into the deep-scan device, bringing my view of the world down to smooth white ceramic a few inches from my face.

I could hear the others leave the room and a sobering silence enveloped me. The machines made hardly any noise and I soon found myself straining to hear anything at all. Even the whir of the air conditioner seemed a comfort. A part of my mind was screaming no! I silenced it, I was never one for second thoughts.

But it did become hard to remember exactly what I was there for. I knew it was something the doctors were doing, but what was it? They had explained

something, I could remember the words, but they didn't make any sense. Nothing did. I started crying in terror, something bad was going to happen. I didn't understand anything except that I knew I was scared. I heard them saying something. How could they be talking to me? They had left the room. I should have understood, but it was just noise. That pushed me over the edge and I screamed. There weren't even words in my head any more, just raw jagged emotions. Fear, I had to run, I had to fight, I had to do something. I could do nothing. Nothing but scream. Then terror ended, and everything was black.

It was black for a long time, except it wasn't black. Black is a color, I didn't have color, or even the memory of color. All I had was me, but in a way that's how it has always been. I stayed in that state, of being a universe of me for a timeless period. There was nothing to measure time by. Nothing external, and nothing internal.

No daylight, no hunger, no heat, no sleep, just me going on forever and never.

All at once the world exploded into sound and color with a fury unmatched by any war. There was no focus, all the colors bled into each other, like a wet water color set into motion. The sound was worse: louder than a hundred jets, all mixed together and incoherent. It was a cacophony from hell. Something in me screamed and I was plunged back into the void.

I cowered within myself, afraid of the sound and the light. But I did try again, and I found that if I concentrated on just one color, it would slowly, - oh

so terribly slowly -, come into focus. Eventually the world was visible to me again, shaper and clearer than it had ever been. As I worked in seeing, I also zeroed in on just one sound at a time, progressing with both senses in slow, tiny steps.

It went very quickly from there. My body, my new body, was responding well. There had been shakes and tremors for a while, but presently they stopped. It was two weeks after the procedure when I spoke for the first time. It was, of course, to Melanie.

"I told you so."

"I should have had them program some charm." She sounded distant, distracted.

"I have the time learn, now."

"But not the inclination." She managed a weak smile. It lacked any of the real warmth and levity that I knew she was capable of.

"How are you feeling?" Her concern was as real as the levity hadn't been.

I took a second and thought about it. It wasn't like some sort of status board leaped into my mind, flashing with green, yellow and red lights, but rather it was just an impression of everything working. I simply knew that I was in perfect shape. What was more interesting, was what was missing.

"Everything is good, but it is a little bizarre." I could see that Mel had been a bit put off by my delay in answering. "I'm still me, but a much more stable me. Without the hormones crashing around my brain, I'm thinking

much more clearly than I have ever done. I'm not getting distracted by biological needs. It's like being really focused."

"Great, not even your body can defy you now." I could see that she regretted the words even as she spoke them. This process had really unsettled her deeply, yet she had still helped me achieve it. I owed her, and I wasn't going to forget it. Not that I could forget anything anymore.

"I'm sorry, Anton," she continued. "This is very hard for me. Just two weeks ago I watched you die."

"I'm still me. I changed bodies, nothing else."

"I know, but it's going to take a while for my brain to catch up with that." She didn't leave though. She came over and sat down next to my bed, and took my hand.

"Can you feel that?" she asked.

"Yes and no. I'm aware of the pressure, not in measurements, yet I know it precisely. But, it's not like what I used to feel. It is different." She let go of my hand, just a trifle too fast. "Why aren't the doctors crawling all over me?" I said to change the subject, at least a little.

"I convinced them that watching us talk would tell them a lot more than pestering you and having you get stubborn on them." She jerked her head towards a camera stuck up in a corner of the ceiling. "They're here, just being peeping-toms about it."

The mood lifted, and we spent the rest of the afternoon chatting while I worked at gaining total motor control of my new body.

Learning to use my new body went much faster than anyone had expected. I was playing cards by the end of that evening, and standing the next morning. Within a week, I was running. I hadn't run in more than fifteen years. It was glorious.

I still slept, but of course it was no longer from a physical need. No one really knew what would happen if I tried to stay awake constantly, so my new artificial brain was engineered to simulate sleep for me. It was on command, of course, but it still ate up time I felt was being wasted.

"If you wait one more week, we can travel back together." I suggested as Melanie packed her bags.

"I've been away from Ruben too long as it is." That was an excuse, and we both knew it. She was still unsettled by my transformation.

"Okay." I didn't want a fight. She had been a trooper through all this, but I felt that I knew with certainty that everything was ending. "The engineers have a few more checks to finish up. They won't take my word that everything is working perfectly."

Later, out on the tarmac, as she climbed into the private jet, I almost told her about the new perceptions that were forming in my mind. I didn't, partly because I didn't have the words to describe them.

But mostly because I didn't want to have her stay when she didn't want to. I had to be free to be me, I had to let her be free as well.

It was two days later when everything crystallized into perfect, horrible clarity. I had spent the whole night letting a strange inner perception blossom

in my mind. I had over-ridden the sleep function, following this new and irresistible sensation. Just as the sun dawned, a dawn full of red, and pinks, and sea breezes, I knew what I was sensing. In its beautiful, amazingly straight-forward design, I was sensing my own mind. In a panic, an utterly predictable panic, I called Melanie.

"I know what I am!" I shouted as her face came into view on the video pick-up.

"Rude." She was half-dressed, not even bothering to cover herself as she sat in the bed.

"I'm a machine! There is no ghost, only the machine!" I wasn't making a lot of sense, I was on the verge of hysteria. But I knew it was just the verge, it would play itself out and I would calm down and explain everything.

"You're not a machine, Anton, you're a man in a machine." She looked more awake now, the anger gone from her face.

"I'm programming! That's what I am. Nothing but inputs and outputs."

"Anton..."

"Listen to me! I'm aware of every aspect how my mind works. I can't explain how, the words don't exist, but I know. I know exactly how I will react to anything. The world gives me inputs, and the programming dictates what I do. I don't have a choice in anything!" I could see the horror creeping over her face, I wish I could have stopped there but, of course, I couldn't. "I never had it."

"What do you mean?" She knew, she was just not facing it. I wished I had been the kind of person who could live in denial, perhaps then my new brain would have rejected it's unique self-awareness.

"This," I tapped my skull to make sure, I always like making sure I was understood. "is a perfect copy. I never had any control, it was always programming. All the illusions are gone, Mel. Free will is a myth." I started crying. Naturally there weren't any tears, there had been no call to include that capability. "I can't choose anything, Mel. Not even to end it all. None of us are free to chose anything."

For a moment I thought she was going to lose control, the horror of it all being too much for her. But then she steadied herself and looked straight at me through the video pick-up.

"You're wrong," she said, shaking her head in denial. "This is what you've become, it's not what you were." I watched as she reached up and snapped off the video link.

She's wrong, of course. But she didn't have any more choice in admitting it than I had in telling her about it.