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Author's Introduction

This novella is set in a strange future world where entity transference, swapping bodies, is a way of life. The concept is far too big for a single story, though, and I have developed it into my new novel, HOPSCOTCH, of which "Identity Crisis" is a small part.

I

Eduard lay on his narrow bed, cocooned in damp sheets, his pores seeping a cold feverish sweat. He was all alone, shuddering, as the sickness coursed through the body. He hadn't expected the symptoms to be this bad when he'd volunteered his services.

In a single week he'd already spent four days in someone else's body, a limited-term hopscotch, enduring a miserable round of the flu just so some businessman wouldn't miss his meetings. Unglamorous, maybe, but it was a way to make a living.

The newsnet stories had called this a particularly virulent strain of influenza. It had much of the population worried, but Eduard knew he would get through it. He would survive. After all, he had asked for this. He had no one to blame but himself.

Trembling, he squeezed his puffy green eyes shut, seeing little explosions of Technicolor behind his lids. He sat up on the mattress, clutching his stomach, squeezing the middle-aged flabby potbelly as his

intestines knotted up. He swung off the bed and lumbered toward the bathroom.

He could have hurried faster in his own young and healthy physique, but this aging form had trouble just moving about, doing normal daily activities. Encumbered by the flu as well, Eduard had even greater trouble. If the man who actually owned this body had kept himself healthier in general, he might not have been so susceptible to getting sick in the first place.

But the man was a busy executive, with more credits in his account than he could spend. And such an important person couldn't afford to be laid up for an illness. He had board meetings to attend, fund-raisers to throw, decisions to make, and publicity to spark. After only one day of feeling the flu grow worse and worse, the exec had become desperate.

And so he'd hired Eduard, who offered to be sick for him.

For an exorbitant fee, Eduard agreed to live in the exec's body for the time it took to recover. A hell of a way to earn spending money beyond his dull daily job, but also a great way to take advantage of the system. It was only pain and physical discomfort, after all—and it wasn't even his body. He could endure it. No problem.

With the amount of money he'd get paid for this ordeal, Eduard wouldn't have to work a real job for weeks, perhaps even months if he was frugal. And he'd certainly learned how to be frugal in the orphanage.

In the ailing body, Eduard staggered into the bathroom and managed to splash cold water on his face. The cheeks and skin felt oily with sweat, too soft from the extra fat padding his jowls. He looked in the mirror and saw a stranger staring back at him through his own eyes.

The exec's wife probably wouldn't mind him coming home to her in a virile young body....

His stomach clenched again, and he vomited explosively into the sink. After a few moments, holding himself and shaking to get over the wave of nausea, he splashed more water, rinsed the facilities, then lumbered back to the bed, breathing shallowly. His lungs seemed smaller despite the largeness of this body.

Eduard kept telling himself he could put up with this. Only a few more days, then he could be back to normal once more. He considered contacting his friend Daragon—they'd grown up together in the orphanage—but Daragon's weird ability had made him a prime candidate for the Bureau of Tracing and Locations. Right now, he'd be too busy learning odd law-enforcement techniques to come see a miserably sick man.

It was just a minor nuisance, regardless of how bad he felt. No problem. Eduard was a survivor. He did what needed to be done.

He slumped onto the sheets and wondered if he would be able to nap. He doubted sleep would come. He would toss and turn feverishly for hours as this weak body struggled to fight off the virus.

* * * *

Eduard vomited twice more that night, then eventually fell into a deep, deep sleep. By morning the fever had broken. He still wasn't healthy enough to demand his own body back, along with his payment, but it would be soon. Another day or two. He had signed the appropriate waivers and he would tolerate the sickness until the exec's body returned to its nominal level of health.

He showered twice that day, trying to overcome the unwashed feeling inside this body, but he shook off the mood. He couldn't afford to think like that.

The following day he did swap back with the body's original owner. After synching ID patches, Eduard drew a deep breath, flexing his arms and looking out the office window. It needed cleaning.

The exec was glad to have the flu over with, though he did seem a bit reluctant to give Eduard his young body back. Nevertheless, their contract had been consummated, and both parties were satisfied. Each time he finished such a deal, Eduard felt as if he had put something over on the world.

Daragon often frowned at what he did, but Eduard got paid well for it. He just had to go through a few brief unpleasant parts of other peoples' lives for them. It was a lucrative niche.

II

The hovercar left the main traffic patterns behind, cruising high above malls and pedestrian streets. Daragon, the Bureau's new trainee, peered out the back window as the vehicle wove through a complex of warehouses and cranes and launch platforms on sprawling docks that extended like pseudopods out into the Pacific. He watched the scrambled Brownian motion of commerce, bustling workers, small and large craft skating like water striders across the ocean, bullet-boats tugging barges into port.

What would Eduard think of this!

Far out on the water, cleanly separated from any structure on land but towering high enough to be an artificial island, stood a massive offshore drilling rig. It had been abandoned in place, modified into a new sort of building.

BTL Headquarters.

At the edge of the offshore city, the hovercar landed on a metal-plated dock that extended to the edge of the calm water. The emerald doors raised up like an insect shrugging its carapace. Daragon emerged, standing straight in his dark trainee jumpsuit. The fresh wind struck his face, laden with salt and iodine.

The man who met him on the platform was well muscled, his stomach like a washboard, the tendons in his neck like cords. With his presence, he seemed to occupy a much larger physical space than his actual body required. His hair was short and dark, just beginning to speckle with gray. His eyes were wide-set, a chestnut brown. "My name is Mordecai Ob. Perhaps you've heard of me?"

"Certainly, sir!" Ob was the Bureau Chief, a powerful man who kept himself isolated, ambitious but rarely seen except by those in the inner sanctum of the Bureau of Tracing and Locations. Why would a person of such importance waste time greeting him, or pay any attention to a new trainee whatsoever?

"Walk with me to my offices. I'll show you more of how the Bureau really works." He squeezed Daragon's hand with an exceedingly muscular grip. "We expect great things of you, young man."

Ob led him down through connecting passageways that rippled with watery light, thick windows that looked out on an underwater world of fish and waving kelp. Lights dazzled from the outside, spotlights, attracting undersea creatures.

“We're linked to the mainland through computer and energy conduits,” Ob said, “but BTL Headquarters is by and large self-sufficient. Much of our work can be done long-distance, invisibly. We try to be unobtrusive when possible.” Ob flexed his broad arms, as if relishing the feel of his own muscles.

Daragon dutifully nodded, knowing that expert searchers could find just about anything in the data-universe of the pervasive computer/organic matrix. “I've been taught many of the services the Bureau provides. But the wealth of available data on COM is so vast, finding anything in particular is like finding a needle in a world full of haystacks.”

Ob smiled. “Our people are most adept at searching for needles. Inspectors, Guards, Tacticians, Apprehension Specialists, Saboteurs, Data Hunters, rank after specialized rank.”

Some operatives were skilled in evidence analysis; they could detect infrared footprints or pick up DNA tracings; they compiled physical clues to help build a trail for Inspectors to follow. Still others were medical technicians trained to unravel brain scans, the mental fingerprints of the specific person who had lived inside a particular body. Ob took Daragon through warm and humid biological reconstruction labs, frigid computer galleries, humming offices, dazzling map rooms, image libraries bursting with an incomprehensible amount of information.

Finally, his mind numb with everything he was seeing, Daragon turned to the brawny man. “Can I inquire which section I'll be working in, sir? They all look ... very interesting.”

Ob's chestnut eyes shone. “Daragon, you are a true wild card. If you can *see* people's personas just by looking at them, no matter which body they're inhabiting, without consulting an ID patch, you perform a function none of these others can do, despite all our technology.”

Daragon's heart fluttered. He had always felt apart from the others, even Eduard. He'd been unable to hopscotch into different bodies, like everyone else. He didn't know who his parents were, or why he had turned out this way. He felt worthless, a freak.

But his mental abilities had turned inward. He couldn't reach out and exchange minds with another person—but he could look at their souls and recognize them for who they were. He could *see* the true person, their aura, no matter what body they inhabited. Now that he thought about it, Daragon realized just how important it would be for an Inspector to glance over a crowd and spot the mind he was looking for.

Ob beamed like a proud father. “In all the years I've been in the Bureau, you're only the second one I've found. There are only a few known examples in any generation. Having you with us gives the Bureau an extremely valuable tool.”

Daragon flushed. “And I always thought I was some kind of ... throwback because I couldn't do what everyone else could.”

Ob's generous laugh warmed the young man's heart. “Nonsense. Your telepathic breakthrough simply took a different form. BTL experts have been very interested in uncovering precedents in mental development. Way back at the dawn of time, the human race went through a ‘bicameral revolution,’ when our minds split into left and right hemispheres. *This* is a similar evolutionary step, with consciousness becoming detachable from our physical brains.”

Fascinated, Daragon nodded vigorously. “I had always heard that the first hopscotching was triggered by generations of people uploading and downloading to old-style computer networks and virtual reality

environments. *That's* how personalities first became detached from the body, and now most people can hopscotch with just a touch. But one thing has always puzzled me. The amount of data that needs to be transferred is so enormous, and to be done so quickly —”

Ob brushed off his comment, faintly condescending. “Yes, but at the root level, it all boils down to a form of telepathy. No one's ever clocked a benchmark telepathic transfer rate.” He smiled up as a small shark swam past the thick window, its torpedo body sinuous. “I know you must have a million questions, but there will be time. You will become familiar with all the theories and all the analytical methods as your training continues. Once you join us, you are a part of the Bureau for life.”

They stood together, deep underwater, surrounded by girders and walls, curved windows that looked out into the sea. Ob patted him on the shoulder. “The world will be under your watchful eye, young man.”

III

Eduard's first regular job after leaving the orphanage a year ago, had been a tedious and boring routine, despite its superficial thrills. It was hot and dirty work, high up on the outside of the mirrored skyscrapers. Wearing a mag-lock harness that attached him to support struts between windows, he hung seemingly miles above the pavement. Below, the street crowds and hovervehicles swirled about, so far away they looked like colored pixels on a grid of the city.

Eduard spent his days with a cleaning and repair kit, zipping up and down the building exteriors, one structure after another, cleaning windows, patching cracks, strengthening bricks and blocks that had showed signs of wear after decades of weathering.

Eduard could dangle up where he could feel the breezes, sense the tantalizing drop below him. It made him *alive*, spending his days on the edge of peril. Such a contrast with his childhood with Daragon, which had been safe and protected and calm. Riding high above even the topmost airplanes of hovercars, Eduard had felt happy and fulfilled ... but then his restlessness had kicked in again.

His work partner was a lanky and unambitious man named Olaf Pitervald. Olaf had big-knuckled hands and scarecrowish arms and legs. His pale skin flushed easily, and his pale hair was a colorless mass that covered his pink scalp.

Eduard could single-handedly cover the entire side of a skyscraper faster than he and Olaf could do it together, but the lanky man liked to hang beside him in his harness. Olaf spent more time in incessant conversation than actually doing his job. “We get paid the same, no matter how hard we work,” he said with a jerky shrug.

As Eduard diligently patched chinks using his polysteel compound, Olaf would gaze through the windows, searching out attractive female bodies. He would make cat-calls, treating any women he saw as a sex objects, emboldened because he knew they could never hear his words through the glass. He was unmarried, probably because he'd never found the nerve.

“How do you like that one, eh?” Olaf pushed his face close to the glass, where a buxom cinnamon-haired woman sat in a lobby area directing visitors.

Eduard had no idea whether it was even a woman or a man inside the body; some corporations simply rented sexy females to act as living artwork in the reception areas. Then the corporations hired pleasant

and competent employees to swap into those beautiful bodies during the workday.

Suspended in his harness, Olaf loved to stare, barely keeping the drool from coming out of his mouth. Eduard scowled. "So save up your credits, rent yourself the body of a stud, and go date one of those women." Olaf balked, though. He was stingy with his money, but also preferred his imaginary conquests to risking failure. Rolling his eyes, Eduard went back to work.

One day Olaf seemed to be more unsettled than usual, doing very little work. He hung in his harness next to Eduard, though he didn't seem to want to talk, offering only occasional bitter or surly comments. Finally, Eduard grew disgusted. "Either tell me what's wrong or leave me alone. You're even less pleasant company than usual."

"Facial surgery," the lanky man finally admitted. "Dental prosthetics. I have to get three teeth replaced." Grasping the harness with the crook of his right arm, Olaf jabbed his fingers along his jawline. "In here. They're going to laser-cut some molars and install organic prosthetics. Too much enamel damage, they say. Easier to replace than to fix."

"So?" Eduard said.

"I don't like the idea of somebody cutting up my mouth," Olaf pouted, "taking pieces out of me." He fretted in the harness.

Eduard frowned. Minor surgery didn't seem a terribly pleasant prospect, but nothing to be terrified about. No problem. "Are you worried about the operation itself? Or is it that you just don't want to be there when it's happening?"

"I want it to be all over with, and not have to sit through it and feel the pain." He moaned pathetically.

"Yeah, right." Eduard looked over at his partner as they both swung high, high above the streets. His eyebrows knitted. "How many spare credits do you have?"

"What do you mean?" Olaf looked suspicious all of a sudden. "Do you need a loan, eh? I don't lend money."

"Not to loan it. To *pay* it. You pay me, and I'll swap with you. I'll go sit through your dental surgery for you. You won't feel a thing."

Olaf stuttered, swinging in the harness. "No, I don't think so. I couldn't ask that of you.... Uh, how much would I need to pay?"

"A thousand credits."

"What!" Olaf couldn't believe what he was hearing. "I can't afford that!"

"Yes, you can."

"But I have to pay for the surgery, too. And miss a day of work."

"If you swap into my body, you don't need to miss a day of work. But, if you'd rather sit there all alone while they go into your mouth with their lasers, chopping up your teeth, ripping them out.... Have you ever smelled burning blood, Olaf? Smoke drifting out of your mouth and into your nose?"

“I can spare five hundred. That should be enough. It's only going to be a few hours.”

“For five hundred, *you* can put up with it for a few hours,” he said. “Give me nine hundred and you won't have to feel a thing until it's all over.”

Sweat broke out on Olaf's brow, despite the sharp and cool breezes. He could see in Olaf's watery eyes that the other man desperately wanted to agree, and Eduard refused to haggle further. Nine hundred credits. Finally Olaf agreed.

At the end of the workday, Eduard swapped with him, spent the next afternoon in a polished office with all the high-tech surgery needs: anesthetics, quiet music, soothing scents that masked medicinal smells, and a competent dental surgeon with robotic assistants and absolute precision. It wasn't so bad at all.

When it was all over, after he'd been paid and after they had hopscotched back into their home-bodies, Eduard didn't have the heart to tell Olaf that he hadn't felt a thing. The nerve deadeners had worked perfectly, the surgery had gone as planned, and Olaf still had to endure the miserable throbbing pains as his body healed....

Afterward, Eduard had seen the whole prospect as an interesting opportunity. It was time for him to leave, to change, to do something else with his life. He began reading the want ads, requests for bodies or various partners. From that point, Eduard simply listed himself on the board, and word got around.

IV

Daragon had not set foot on the mainland in six months, and he saw no opportunity in the near future either. The Bureau and its concerns had become his life twenty-four hours a day.

His afternoons were immersed in the nuances of law enforcement, studying old cases, trying to solve forgotten mysteries. Once humans had learned how to hopscotch, many legal precedents had to be set. The law stated unequivocally that the “perpetrator” of a crime was the *person*, the mind rather than the body. Prosecutions involved locating the mind that had been inside a human vehicle when any felony was committed, back-tracking an identity through COM or ID patches, or sheer detective work.

The BTL used technological means to unmask a mental imprint left on the host brain. A person's mind left readily identifiable pathways for a short while, much as a body could be marked by its own unique fingerprints. Unfortunately, such methods were time-consuming and involved excruciating pain for the suspect body, which more often than not turned out to be innocent.

Thus, Bureau Chief Ob had high hopes for Daragon, who could *see* the identities of people, mark guilty parties at a glance, no matter what bodies they wore. Daragon had the potential to become the greatest Inspector of this age—if he worked hard enough at it.

And Daragon worked very hard.

Unlike the rest of the undersea headquarters, Ob's office was plush and warm. An ornamental gas fireplace brought a cheery natural light. The Bureau Chief said, “We've survived for over a century on the sharpest razor edge our civilization has ever encountered. Think of the opportunities for total upheaval, the lack of individualism as we have always known it. Without a ready and reliable means for instant identification of a ‘person,’ society would crumble into chaos. The sheer potential for abuse is awesome.”

“Yes, sir. That is why the BTL is so important.”

Ob tapped his fingertips together, bemused. “We can't even begin to keep track of everybody, Daragon, unless they themselves cooperate.”

“Every person has an implanted ID patch, sir.”

“Useless, unless the people synch after swapping. That is why the penalties are so severe. We must not let others discover that they *can* get away with fooling us.”

“Yes, that would be dangerous.” Daragon listened, not even thinking of being judgmental.

Ob raised the COM screen on his own desk and punched in a request. He printed out the results, handing the hardcopy across the desk. Daragon's heart pounded as he took the paper and scanned the words.

“Your first legitimate case, tracking down a lost family member. Consider: a woman needs a vital medical treatment, something that can only be cured through parallel DNA-matching therapy. And that can only be done if she's able to find the home-body of her sibling. Unfortunately, he hopscotched out of his original body long ago, sold it in a long-term lease, which was transferred to another person, who died outside of the swapped body, which then went onto the open market.”

Daragon read the particulars. He made a special effort not to smile or frown or show any sort of emotion whatsoever. That would be bad form.

“Thus, the family has to track down their son's lost home-body. A matter of life and death, and they came to the BTL. The son himself has kept in touch, but he's hopscotched from body to body as he took job after job.”

Daragon pressed his lips together, then folded the printout and stuffed it into one of his pockets. “I'll find him for you.”

“Yes, you will,” Mordecai Ob said. “I have faith in you, Daragon. But don't find the body for *me* —do it for them.”

* * * *

In windowless chambers filled with bubbling coolants and life-support systems, the Bureau's mutated Data Hunters hung in limbo, living a surreal life with virtual bodies, lost inside the computer/organic matrix. Data Hunters were more efficient than any “pure” human, but also so far from normal life that sometimes the actual questions eluded their understanding.

Daragon stood inside the dim, dank-smelling room. As his eyes adjusted, he looked up to where the hairless, stunted bodies hung suspended in their harnesses, wired to the vast cosmos of COM. Their flaccid arms had withered through lack of use. Their spines were twisted, their heads over-large, their eyes squeezed shut and blind, seeing only through neural inputs that linked them into the sea of information.

“I need some help,” Daragon said in a loud, firm voice. Bubbles continued to jet into the coolant and recirculation tubes. He saw no motion, no reaction.

One of the embryos drifted in its restraints and turned a sightless face toward him. A voice came out of a small speaker in the wall. “Ah, somebody's come to give me a purpose in life! What is it you seek? Wait, forgive my lack of social graces ... we get no practice whatsoever in here.” The body stirred faintly, as if a breeze had bumped its way through the room. Now, the voice came from a different place, disorienting Daragon.

“My name is Jax, and you must introduce yourself properly before you make your request. I'm not just a genie in a bottle who's required to give you three wishes, you know.”

He was taken aback. He had anticipated Data Hunters to be alien and incomprehensible, not talkative. “My name is Daragon. Can I call your attention to a case file? If we locate an original body, we may be able to help a person who needs medical treatment.”

“Ah, Daragon—a humanitarian gesture. How wonderful!” The hovering Data Hunter scanned the file in less than a millisecond. “Shouldn't be too difficult. It'll keep me occupied for awhile. That's what we're here for, you know.”

Daragon nodded, not knowing what to say. He had never made polite conversation with a mutated husk before.

“But first, you must promise to meet my payment request,” Jax said.

Daragon brushed down the front of his trainee Inspector uniform. “But you work for the Bureau. We're part of the same team. This is your job.”

“Do you want me to help you or not?” Jax's body did not stir, but the voice coming from the speaker had an interesting lilt to it.

“What is your price?”

“I want you to come and talk to me,” Jax said. “We don't get much company, and I can do everything else through COM. But the network can't provide plain, faulty human companionship.”

“If that's all you want, then I agree to your terms.”

“Good,” Jax said. “Come back in an hour and I'll have the information you need. After that, I want you to come and tell me what you did.”

V

Wearing his best suit of clothes, Eduard took the lift-tube to the plush upper levels of offices that were inhabited by lawyers of all kinds. He made a cursory check of his appearance, brushed down the front of his clothes, straightened his dark hair, and walked into the meeting with a stern, tough expression on his face. When the negotiations started, he had to make sure he got off on the right foot.

A crowd of expensive suits waited for him in the boardroom—representatives of the client, family members, and legal counsel. No face bore the slightest glimmer of warmth.

Seeing this, Eduard wondered if *he* should have bothered to contract his own legal advocate. But the bargain was fundamentally simple, after all, and he understood all the issues. He'd done many such

agreements before, but never with such formality.

Behind the boardroom table hovered several go-fers, lower-echelon employees anxious for any job in a big firm. Their sole purpose was to be on call during long and excruciating deliberations. Any time one of the executives had a full bladder, a go-fer would swap bodies and walk out of the room to relieve him or herself. No need to put an important meeting on hold for such irrelevant interruptions.

At the end of the long table a cadaverous old woman sat propped. She leaned forward, bracing herself on shriveled arms. Her skin hung like loose fabric on her bones, tinted a grayish-green from the bizarre medical treatments she had already endured. Her eyes were sharp and reptilian, her nose pinched. Eduard had never before met a person who seemed so altogether unpleasant.

“I am very pleased to meet you, Madame Ruxton,” Eduard said, pumping forced charm into his voice. Her lips compressed like a purse-string drawn tight.

The tallest lawyer stepped up, and others withdrew various documents from folders, spreading them out on the table. “You are aware of the risks, Eduard—uh, there's no last name listed.”

“Don't have one.” He waved the comment aside. “I was raised in an orphanage.”

Flustered, the lawyer continued. “Madame Ruxton's surgery is serious, and you are being asked to endure it for her. Your survival is not guaranteed. We estimate a twenty percent probability that you won't live through the operation.”

“I'll survive, no problem,” Eduard said. “I'm strong, and I'll help the body through it.”

“Nevertheless, we must face reality,” another lawyer said. “You have been offered a very large sum of money in order to do this job. Madame Ruxton has guaranteed that such payment will be made—unless, of course, you don't survive the surgery.”

“She'll still make the payment,” Eduard said sharply. Without being asked, he took a seat exactly opposite from the withered old woman. “If I'm going to die in this woman's body, she can pay the fee one way or another. And the amount is triple if I don't survive the operation.” Eduard's eyes suddenly hardened. “That decreases the incentive for any sort of medical mishap.” Eduard drew out papers naming Daragon as his beneficiary.

The lawyers looked over at the old woman. She nodded sharply. They hadn't really expected to get away with a death disclaimer anyway. “But I get to keep the body, by default,” the old woman said. “If you die.”

Eduard took a deep breath. He had expected that part too, but he knew this was a battle he couldn't win. “If I'm dead I won't have any more use for it, will I?”

“Quite correct,” Ruxton said.

The go-fers fidgeted, waiting for something to do. One of them offered more coffee to all the parties with a hopeful expression on her face.

Eduard picked up one copy of the thick contract, leaned back in the chair, and began to skim the paragraphs. He was aware of the various ramifications, and he flagged certain minor points that he insisted on changing, just for the sake of appearances. It all seemed standard, though he had never done

this with such a risky and painful set of consequences.

“Are you certain you don't want legal representation of your own?” one of the other lawyers said.

Eduard raised his eyes, still holding the documents in front of him. “No. I can be as suspicious as anyone else.”

He made the attorneys wait as he read through the entire document.

The old woman coughed, deep retching sounds, as if she had a gravel pit operating inside her lungs. Her family members flocked close by, attending her with exaggerated concern. Perhaps they even wanted Madame Ruxton to die, but now through Eduard she would have a new lease on life.

Eduard handed the contracts over while the rest of the attorneys bustled about making copies, certifying documents, and no doubt charging Madame Ruxton an exorbitant fee for their ministrations.

“When is your surgery scheduled?” Eduard asked, looking directly at the rich old woman.

The lawyers glanced at him, and Madame Ruxton tried to sit up straight, holding her posture with great effort. Her salamander eyes glittered at him. “Tomorrow,” she said. “My body won't last long without it.”

Eduard kept his face bland, surprised that they had cut it so close. “My calendar's open.”

With a flourish of a pen that laid down glittering magnetic ink, he signed the contract. He did not relish the prospect of living in the crone's body for the operation or the brief recovery period. But he could do it. He could survive this, and it would give him an importance and prestige he had never before had. He hoped it would be the start of many good things to come.

Eduard had long ago abandoned his high-rise window maintenance job. The actual credits didn't mean much to him. This was success for its own sake. It was *winning* .

* * * *

After swapping into the aching and withered form, Eduard lay back on the surgery table. It was all he could do to lever himself on his elbows and endure the weight of sheets around him.

Ruxton's body was a collapsing ancient structure held together with cobwebs. The deep agony in his bones spoke of unspeakable musty age, and his heartbeat stuttered like the slow drumbeat of a dirge.

The surgery would repair her deteriorating vascular system, the thin-walled heart chambers, the weakening muscles in her chest. But Madame Ruxton would never feel young and healthy again, regardless of how many operations she underwent. He saw her standing there in his home-body, eyes still glittering. A calculating expression pinched his familiar face.

For the first time, Eduard felt uneasy.

His body ached so badly that he welcomed the anesthetic. He saw his own physique—Ruxton's, for the time being—shifting and distorting behind rheumy eyes that no longer clearly saw the world.

Eduard heaved a deep breath, felt the symphony of pain in his sunken chest and lungs, then drifted backward into chemically induced blackness....

VI

In full uniform, Daragon went to the business offices of the person who now owned the brother's original body that had gone missing years before. The current owner was a public relations specialist who dealt with celebrities. His name was Stradley, and he called himself a "hype-meister."

As Daragon waited in the reception room, he glanced at the receptionist, who shrugged toward the door where Stradley sat "in consultation," though Daragon had no idea with whom. Finally, the exuberant hype-meister burst out of his office wearing a grin, but the falseness of it wore off in a moment. Daragon had seen pictures of the missing brother's home-body and recognized it immediately.

The hype-meister just scowled. "So, what does a Beetle want in my office? You guys certainly don't need *my* help with publicity. Of course, maybe the BTL could use a bit more favorable coverage."

Daragon didn't rise to the bait. "That's not why I'm here, sir."

Stradley crossed his arms over his chest. The hype-meister wasn't taking good care of himself. His neck and face seemed slack, a bit jowly, and he had begun to grow a heavy gut. His eyes were bloodshot, his movements frenetic, as if he sampled too many stimulants, legal or illegal. Daragon hoped the body remained in good enough condition for the medical treatment.

"State your purpose," Stradley said. "I command high hourly rates, and I'll start charging, if you start wasting my time." Daragon wondered how the man would ever get a bill through the BTL's bureaucratic accounting systems, but he decided not to press the matter.

"We want your body, sir," he said. "Someone needs the loan of it—the sister of its original owner."

The hype-meister narrowed his eyes, trying to figure out Daragon's angle. "Why on earth is the Bureau messing around with a personal problem? Your mistress, maybe?"

"She needs DNA-matching therapy. You have the only body they can give the appropriate tests to. You have the genes, and they need to extract some samples."

"Not from my body they won't." Stradley raised his arms. "I'm a busy man with a burgeoning office here. This is *my* body now. You can check your records. I acquired it free and clear, permanent lease, a year and a half ago. And even then, that wasn't from its original owner. This guy has been bounced and bounced. Who knows how many other people have lived inside it? Now it's mine."

"Mr. Stradley," Daragon tried again, "the only thing I care about is who *presently* owns the body. That is you. You have the precise genetic match required. Can you find it in your heart to save someone?"

"I can't find it in my heart to give up what I'm doing here to have my body undergo a long and excruciating medical work." They faced off in the reception area. Stradley made no move to invite him into the main office. "I need my body. I use it every day."

Daragon mentally searched through what he had studied. The law remained murky in this area: Stradley was indeed the legitimate owner of that body, and even former family members couldn't force him to undergo a medical procedure he didn't want to have.

Daragon folded his hands in front of him. "You've been in that body for a year and a half, sir. Perhaps

it's time you switched with someone else.”

“I can't afford a new body just at the drop of a hat—that's quite an investment.”

Daragon continued, “I should put you in touch with the family. The parents and the sister may offer enough credits for a replacement body. You can swap out, so they have access to the DNA they need, and you can continue your work uninterrupted.”

Stradley blew through his lips. “Might be acceptable, as long as it's a trade *up* .”

Daragon nodded brusquely. “I won't take up any more of your time today, sir. I will provide the family with contact information and let them resolve this matter.”

“No promises,” Stradley warned.

As he left, before returning to the BTL undersea headquarters, Daragon knew he should check up on Eduard first. They had a lot to talk about.

VII

Nightmares later, Eduard swam back to consciousness, letting light fall through his eyelids and then into his weary eyes. His brain couldn't think.

But he could focus on people surrounding his bedside, the tubes and electronic monitors hooked up to his body, which was now one constant scream of pain, louder than before. His discomfort ranged from low moans in his arms and muscles, to a shout where the open chest wound had been sutured back together. His heart felt different, repaired—but battered into submission, not as good as new.

Then he recognized his home-body across the room ... and a dark uniform at the door, a man with black hair and almond eyes. Daragon!

Eduard's vocal cords were raspy and uncooperative from the heavy anesthetic as well as the weariness of innumerable years. “What ... why are you here?”

Daragon smiled down at him, resplendent in his BTL insignia. “I just wanted to make sure nothing ... uh, *accidentally* happened during your surgery.” He flashed a glance over at the crowded lawyers, Ruxton's family members, and Eduard's home-body, who stood with shoulders squared, arrogant, head held high.

“Am I ... was the surgery successful?” He tried to raise himself, but was unable to. His arms felt like wet balsa wood.

Daragon bent closer. “Oh, yes. I spoke to the doctors immediately before they operated on you. We encouraged them to make sure you pulled through. I believe your recovery will be a swift one.” He turned, looking once more at the Ruxton cadre, all of whom only scowled back at him.

“Thank you, Daragon,” Eduard rasped through the old woman's wattled throat. “It's good to see you again.”

* * * *

When the doctors said Eduard was healthy enough to sit in a hoverchair, Daragon returned to push him

out of the room. He brought seven impressive-looking BTL officers with him. Forming a grim protective barrier, they escorted him down the corridors to where Ruxton's lawyers waited. Eduard did not like the look on Daragon's face.

Her attorneys already had more documents drawn up, but Daragon opened the conversation by saying, "He's healthy enough. The doctors expect a full and complete recovery. Eduard has done his part."

"I'm afraid my body's not yet entirely recovered," Madame Ruxton said, sitting imperiously in Eduard's form, drinking sweetened tea. Sitting in his wheelchair, Eduard wrinkled his nose. Personally, he despised sweetened tea.

One of the lawyers held forth a document. "We have here depositions from the medical professionals who have inspected —" He paused, then looked over at the withered woman in the hoverchair, "— who have inspected this body. This person still has severe liver problems, as well as the potential for total kidney failure within the next year. The pulmonary system remains at greatly diminished capacity." He held up the original paper. "Our signed contract specifically requires that Eduard remain in Madame Ruxton's former body until *full recovery*." The attorney gestured with a clean, manicured hand. "I'm afraid that what we have here is not 'full recovery,' by any stretch of the imagination."

Eduard felt cold inside, wondering if Ruxton's cronies had managed to outwit him. He'd been uneasy before about not getting his own attorney, but had blustered through with arrogance and misguided pride. He felt stupid, and he hated to feel stupid. He had been trapped by his own naiveté.

"I'm afraid that's not acceptable," Daragon said calmly, "and obviously beyond the intent of the original contract." The Beetles stepped around him, flanking Eduard in the hoverchair. They moved closer, intimidating.

Ruxton's lawyers crossed their arms over their chests in unison, like some sort of choreographed act. "We have the resources to tie this up in litigation for years, if necessary. Either way, Madame Ruxton will win."

"And the BTL has the power to impound all of her assets in anticipation of our eventual victory," Daragon countered. "I can cite numerous precedents."

Eduard blinked, without the strength to move or even to speak for himself.

"That is unacceptable," Daragon repeated. "You'll swap back now."

He nudged Eduard's hoverchair forward. Madame Ruxton didn't move.

Daragon lowered his voice and withdrew a spray vial from a pouch at his belt. "You've heard of Scramble? A drug that breaks down your barriers and allows someone to swap with you, no matter how much you resist."

Finally Madame Ruxton flew to her feet and whirled, staring down at her weakened body in the hoverchair. "What've you paid them? I can double what you've offered. What kind of pull do you have with the Bureau?"

Eduard just shrugged his bony shoulders.

She snapped at Daragon and all the other Beetles. "I can pay you twice what he's paying you. Right

now, in cash.”

Daragon said, “Attempted bribery of a BTL officer is an actionable offense. We have a room full of witnesses. Shall I take you into custody now?”

A lawyer leaned close to her. “That was not very wise, Madame Ruxton.”

“If you swap now with Eduard, perhaps we can forget the entire matter,” Daragon said. The other Beetles pressed closer.

Teeth clenched, eyes flashing behind Eduard's familiar face, Ruxton sighed with enough vehemence that she spat out her breath. “Oh, very well!”

She leaned down to the hoverchair and touched her own temples. Eduard looked up at her with weak eyes, and it seemed as if she ripped his consciousness free and slammed it back into his own body.

Madame Ruxton sulked back into her wheelchair-bound form.

Eduard reeled, disoriented to be healthy and energetic again, but glad to have his home-body back. Each breath seemed like liquid honey in his lungs. His muscles tingled, so alive again, finally.

The attorneys guided the old woman's chair away, making excuses as she railed at them.

Daragon smiled at Eduard, then gestured for the other Beetles to leave them in private. Once they were alone, though, Daragon's face tightened into a scowl, and he no longer wore a victorious expression. “That wasn't the brightest thing you've ever done, Eduard. Why didn't you obtain your own counsel?”

Eduard did not even try to excuse his stupidity. “I assumed I knew what could happen. But I didn't imagine half of the contingencies. I was clueless.”

“You were out of your league.”

Eduard could not stop himself from grinning, touching a ghost pain in his chest from where the operation scars had been. “Do you know how much they paid me for that? I can survive for a year on those credits!”

“You almost didn't survive for a day. Ruxton's group had already tried to pay off the doctors.” Daragon bent over, frowning with concern. “Is this the way you really want to live, Eduard?”

Eduard pursed his lips, thinking. “I'll just have to be more careful next time. Thank you very much. I owe you one.”

Daragon just shook his head, and said his brief, brusque farewells. Eduard drew a lungful of air and raised his head high, glad to be alive.

VIII

When he went for his weekly meeting with Mordecai Ob, Daragon wore his trim, neatly pressed uniform. The broad-shouldered Bureau Chief stared into the gas fireplace, where silent flames forever attempted to consume ceramic logs. Stacks of memos and summaries of investigations-in-progress lay piled around

him. On a routine day, all aspects of the BTL would have fascinated Ob. But at the moment he appeared to have lost interest.

“What's wrong, sir?” Daragon said. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

The Chief blinked at him in surprise. “Do you now have the talent to read into troubled matters of the human heart, as well as just spotting identities?”

Daragon stood at attention, keeping the grin off his face. “I just try to be perceptive, sir.”

“My troubles have nothing to do with the Bureau.” Ob picked up a printout and scanning it, but he was just fidgeting to distract himself. “Time to get back to work.”

“Sir, all aspects of your life concern the Bureau—especially if it has any impact on your ability to function here.”

“That sounds like something *I* would tell my best trainee.”

“Your best trainee just said it to you, sir. What can I do to help?”

Using a control near the front drawer, Ob turned the flames down. “I've recently lost my personal trainer, and I need a replacement. Someone to exercise and keep me in shape. I'm not looking forward to the frustration and attendant difficulties. I've got enough to do.” He flexed his arm, gripping the bicep. “I try to keep myself fit. I find it sharpens my mind. But I don't have time to do it myself.”

Daragon considered, the wheels already turning in his mind. “What type of person, exactly, are you looking for, sir?”

“As I said, I'm proud of my body. I won't give it to just anyone.” Ob folded his big hands in front of him, no longer making any pretense of working with the papers. “I need someone I can trust, someone to do that workout for me, so I can devote my energy to administering our great organization.”

Daragon clasped his hands behind his back, standing tall. “Would you mind very much if we skipped our briefing for this morning, sir? I think I've got the right person for you.”

* * * *

Daragon waited in the open-air coffee shop. Dressed in his BTL uniform, he didn't find it difficult to keep an empty table or even empty chairs around him. He pulled up the dark sleeve and glanced at his watch. Already twenty minutes late. Eduard wasn't a punctual sort of person.

As the street outside hummed with a flow of people, he scanned the crowd. He had no idea what body Eduard would be wearing when he came, but Daragon used his ability of spotting personas to recognize his old friend just by his inner presence. He fixed his gaze on an old man hobbling toward the coffee shop—and made out the colorful core he knew to be Eduard, even without checking his ID patch.

Daragon waved to signal him over. Eduard approached with exceedingly cautious steps. His back was hunched, and his skin had a rough and leprous appearance. In his creaking body, he sat at the round table with a heavy sigh as if severing the puppet strings to his arms and legs.

Daragon shook his head in dismay. “Look at you. What are you doing to yourself?”

Eduard just waved a swollen-knuckled hand. “Some old guy had a hot date. Limited term. I’ll get my own body back this evening.”

The waiter came over, waiting for their orders. Daragon chose a spiced drink and looked at Eduard, who asked for a warm herb tea. “This body can’t handle too much caffeine. The digestive system is pretty much shot.”

“Eduard, you can’t keep doing this to yourself. How often do you hopscotch? How many times a week?”

“Depends on how many clients I get.”

Daragon leaned forward conspiratorially. “Listen, let me suggest something so much better for you.”

Eduard crossed his liver-spotted arms over his skeletal chest, annoyed at the scolding. “Yeah, right. I’ve been thinking it’s time to move on again, before I get too bored. Find the next phase in my life. But I’d rather not be turned into some kind of experimental subject for the Beetles.”

He stiffened. “Why do you see only bad things about the Bureau? We watch out for abuses of power, spotlights the dangers inherent in unregulated hopscotching.” Even to him, it sounded like a rehearsed speech. “Downtrodden people are too tempted to sell their bodies, their lives.”

Now Eduard bridled. “Like me, you mean?”

Daragon gave him a hard look. “You were glad enough for my help with Madame Ruxton’s lawyers.”

Eduard pursed his lips, softening his voice. “Granted. Sorry if I insulted you. But no matter how close you observe everybody, you can’t stop all the scams.” He held up his hand to show the filmy rectangle of the ID implant. “These things are too easy to thwart, if somebody is willing to risk enough.”

The waiter came with their drinks, and he picked up his tea with shaking hands and took a quick gulp. Daragon looked at Eduard’s decrepit body with barely concealed dismay. “Please let me make you an offer. It’s an opportunity I think you’ll like.”

Eduard watched skeptically while Daragon outlined his plan with rising enthusiasm. “Wouldn’t it be better than nearly dying for someone else? Better than being sick all the time in someone else’s body? Undergoing surgery for a coward?”

Eduard sipped his herb tea and sat back with a heavy sigh, trying not to show how much this crumbling body pained him. “All right, I’ll hear what this Mordecai Ob has to say, and make my decision based on the merits alone.” He pressed a hand to the small of his back as he stood up. “Doing this crap is getting to be a pain.”

Daragon heaved a huge contented sigh. He gestured to the frail old man Eduard wore. “Mr. Ob cares for himself very much. Even though he’s incredibly powerful, he still lives in the same body he was born with. He could have bought a new one a thousand times over, but instead he’d rather keep his own.”

Eduard looked at the wrinkled parchment flesh on his wrist. “See me tomorrow. I’ll be myself again.”

* * * *

After the hydro-skimmer landed on the big oil-rig platform, Eduard looked around in the sunlight. The

salt wind ruffled his hair. “Nice place. Not much of a tourist attraction, is it?”

“You’re very lucky to be coming here,” Daragon said. “The Bureau rarely allows outside visitors. I had to get special permission for you.”

Eduard pretended to be impressed, but Daragon wasn’t fooled. He just hoped his friend would make a good impression on Mordecai Ob. Down in the richly decorated office, the Bureau Chief had cleared his desk, turned on the fireplace, and set out a plush overstuffed leather chair for Eduard’s interview.

Ob extended a large hand and took Eduard’s grip. “Very pleased to meet you, Eduard.” He gestured for the guest to sit in the leather chair. “Daragon tells me I should hire you as my new personal trainer. So far, I have found his advice to be invaluable.”

Daragon’s heart swelled. Eduard made himself comfortable in the creaking leather chair. He crossed one leg over his knee, brushed the smooth armrest. “So tell me what this position entails. It sounds interesting from the way Daragon describes it.”

Ob put his elbows on his desk. “You’ll be my ‘caretaker.’ I insist on remaining in shape, but I don’t have the time to maintain the necessary effort. Your sole job will be to spend several days a week exercising my body. That’s all. You will go jogging and swimming. You’ll do calisthenics, you’ll eat healthy food. Meanwhile, I’ll spend the rest of the business day in your body and get my work done.”

Eduard played the tough negotiator. “And the pay will be ... ?”

“Substantial. I’ll also give you guest quarters to live on my estate. You’ll be fed and clothed, but you must be at my beck and call at any hour.”

“That’s a tall order.”

Impatient, Daragon replied, “Eduard, look at the other work you’ve been doing. You couldn’t get a better job than this.”

Eduard touched his chest, his arms, and took a deep breath, clearly pleased with how his own body felt. He gazed across the polished desk and noted the older man’s muscular physique. “Yeah, it *would* be nice to hopscotch into someone whose body I’d enjoy living in, instead of just gritting my teeth until it’s time to swap back.”

“Absolutely,” Daragon said. “This is a great deal for all concerned.”

Eduard and Mordecai Ob shook hands, consummating the arrangement.

IX

Eduard perspired heavily in another man’s body—but this time he enjoyed the sensation, an exhilarating workout instead of a miserable fever.

Warm sweat trickled out of his close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair, down his cheeks. Mordecai Ob’s strong heart pumped as he exercised, the blood flowed, the muscles strained. As Eduard panted, fresh air burned in his lungs. According to the clock and his employment contract, he still had another hour of calisthenics before Ob would be satisfied with the workout.

He stood under the overhead lights in the exercise room. Two walls were plate-glass windows that looked out onto the well-tended gardens and paths; two walls were floor-to-ceiling mirrors in which he could watch his muscles ripple, see how he exerted himself.

Eduard gulped half a bottle of water and towed off the sparkling sweat. Then he tugged a sweatshirt over his head, plucking at the thick cloth where it stuck to his skin. He already wore running shorts, good shoes. Ob had taken care of everything. Eduard just had to do the time-consuming work. He waved his hand at the sensor, and the window skated aside. He puffed two breaths like small gunshots, preparing himself, then set off at a fast jog in the fresh air and morning sunshine....

In the past few weeks, Eduard had settled in at the expansive estate. He did Ob's workouts, and he took his generous pay. Ob didn't require much, though he occasionally asked to swap at odd hours, without explaining his intent. *Some shady Beetle stuff*, Eduard supposed. He really didn't care. It was part of the job.

Ob didn't want to be friends, just business associates. He made sure Eduard didn't make himself too obtrusive in his daily life. In fact, Eduard rarely saw the man except to swap in the early mornings, then back again in the evening.

Now, jogging around the estate, he listened to gravel crunch under his shoes. He fell into a rhythm, a pace he could never have matched in his own untrained body, and jogged along a circuit that encompassed two miles. He ran around hedges, through a quaint shrubbery maze copied from an old English manor.

As the path wound through Ob's extensive rose garden, Eduard raised a hand to wave at the huge Samoan gardener, Tanu. The immense man's upper arms were as wide as most people's thighs; his skin was dark and dusky, as if impregnated with the dirt in which he always worked. Tanu had a mane of charcoal hair like something a sword-and-sorcery barbarian might have worn.

But Eduard knew the Samoan was friendly and good-hearted, though he frequently averted his large, dark eyes. Tanu spent most of his time alone with his flowers and shrubbery, trellises and hedges. He not only talked to the plants, but seemed to listen to them as well.

As Eduard jogged past, waving, Tanu raised a hand the size of a boat oar. He had tried to strike up conversations with the gardener, but the dialog was mostly one-sided. He glanced over his shoulder, still trying to get a reaction from Tanu. Not looking where he was going, he stumbled against one of the rose bushes. The thorns made a long red scratch down his right thigh, but Eduard recovered without missing a beat. He glanced down at the rose bush, but saw no obvious damage.

“Sorry!” He brushed off his legs, then sprinted onward.

Another mile to go.

* * * *

At the end of the work day, when Mordecai Ob returned home, Eduard went to meet his employer as the man set down his papers and documents in the holding area by the door. He looked weary and drained, his expression covered with a blanket of stress. Impatient, Ob gestured him forward. “Take your body back. I want to feel refreshed again.”

They hopscotched, and Ob took a deep breath and smiled, glad to be “home,” while Eduard

experienced disappointment in his own form again. The muscles felt stressed and ragged, without the clean energy of a rigorous workout. Ob had left him with a tension headache in the back of his skull.

As Eduard rubbed his stiff shoulders, Ob stood in the middle of the foyer, touching himself, taking a bodily inventory. Before long, he discovered the scratch on his leg. He rubbed it, scowling, his skin flushing. “What have you done?” He undid his pants and reached under the fabric to feel the wound. “What's this?”

“I scratched it on one of the rosebushes during my morning jog. Just an accident.”

“I don't want to hear about any more accidents!” Ob glared with intense, chestnut eyes. Eduard's muscles seized up in an unconscious panic reaction. He could tell why this man was so successful among the Beetles.

“Okay, okay—I'm sorry! It's just a scratch.” After having undergone near-fatal open-heart surgery, Eduard couldn't summon much sympathy for a ridiculously minor blemish. “It'll heal before you know it.”

“Eduard, I have entrusted you with my physical being.” Ob's voice was low and threatening. “If you can't take better care of my body from now on, I won't need your services any longer.”

Eduard struggled to keep his temper in check. This job was too much a gravy train for him to let it go in a fit of pique. “I ... I'll be more careful from now on.”

Ob didn't answer as he indignantly strode to his chambers.

X

Daragon stood in the Chief's office, still bemused to see his friend's familiar features sitting behind the massive, plush desk. “It's been two months, sir. I take it everything is satisfactory with Eduard, then?”

“He's adequate, though occasionally careless.” The Chief took a deep breath, all business now. “You have accomplished all the tasks I have laid out for you. Now it's time to put your knowledge to work, in a practical manner.” Ob leaned back against his desk. “Is there anything you'd like to know? Any mystery you'd like solved? A particular obsession you've had? I'm giving you the full resources of the Bureau to take on your pet project for a few days. Think about it.”

The artificial fireplace in front of the desk hissed and crackled with sound effects. Daragon mulled over the question, but the answer was immediately clear to him. “I'm going to locate my mother or father, sir. I've never known who they were.”

Even from the days of his youth, Daragon had been intrigued by the identity of his biological mother and father. Why had they abandoned him to the orphanage? What secrets did they hold? Did his family already have too many brothers and sisters? Were his parents poor? Were they also unable to hopscotch? Did they have the mental handicap like he did?

Ob let out a quiet laugh. Ostensibly, this project would hone Daragon's identification and location skills, but the Bureau Chief did it because he liked his student. He waved Daragon toward the door. “Go ahead, then—indulge yourself.”

* * * *

Daragon grew accustomed to the strange smells inside the cool, humid chamber. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the only light the grotesquely stunted Data Hunters seemed to require. He heard the recirculators, the bubbles of life-support fluid. “Jax, are you there?”

One of the fishlike embryos stirred in its harness. Cables trailed from his eye sockets, connecting the creature's optic nerves directly to the computer/organic matrix. “Ah, Inspector Daragon! And I'm glad to see that it *is* Inspector now, Grade II even. A promotion due, no doubt, to my brilliant assistance?”

“In part.”

“A large part, I suspect. But whatever it takes to get you to come in and chat. What can I do for you today?” The stunted body swayed, but the voice that came from the speaker was animated, jovial, and good-humored.

“How good are you at finding missing parents?”

Jax groaned melodramatically. “Oh, not *that* tedious question again! Let me guess—Chief Ob gave you your first independent assignment?”

Daragon flushed. “I take it you've done this kind of search before?”

“And succeeded admirably, I might add.”

He laughed. “So I take it that success is practically assured?”

“Not a chance. You don't understand the complexity of your question. Let's just start with your mother— *whois* it, exactly, that you want me to find? Do you want to locate the biological body that gave birth to you? The womb inside which you gestated, the vagina you slid out of—no matter who's living inside the head these days?”

“The body won't tell me anything. I want to meet the *person* who made the decision to give me up. I want to talk to the woman —”

“— or man,” Jax interjected, “if they swapped sexes. Never can tell.”

Daragon sighed. “I just want to have a conversation with the person who decided he or she didn't want to be my parent.”

“That's clear enough, I suppose.” The Data Hunter's body turned toward him, though Jax could be watching from any number of optical sensors. Jax swiveled his eye cables toward the COM nexus in the dim chambers. “Tell me, Inspector Daragon—what's the big deal? Why do you care so much?”

“It's personal,” he answered, his voice quiet and a bit hoarse.

“Hey, this is a discretionary task. You're asking me to bust my figurative butt to track down information for you—don't you think you owe me an explanation?”

Daragon sighed. The hardest part would be explaining it to someone else—especially to a half-human creature who had no direct experience with the real world. “In the orphanage, I used to read books by Charles Dickens. He was an old classic author —”

“I *know* who he was, Daragon.” Jax's voice sounded impatient.

“Of course you would. The tales were compelling, people from other times, with problems and concerns so different from ours, but still the same. Especially when someone read out loud, it was a magical experience, like an old storyteller around a campfire. Very primal, the core of what fiction is all about—not fancy language or convoluted metaphors ... just solid, interesting *stories* .”

“*And... ?*”

“Why the rush? I thought you enjoyed conversation?”

“Only when it has a point.”

He heaved a breath. “I enjoyed *Oliver Twist* the most. It raised the question of whether a simple boy without parents and without a bright spot in the world might be an unrecognized prince. Oliver didn't know his birthright, thought he was just an unremarkable orphan—and after a series of adventures, he found that he was much more than he seemed.”

Daragon flushed in embarrassment as a staticky chuckle reverberated through the speakers. Jax said, “So you think you might be the heir to some great fortune!”

“I knew you wouldn't understand.” Now that he heard someone else say it, the thought seemed ridiculous. “I just want to know.”

“Good enough,” Jax said brightly. “I can always tell honesty when I hear it. Therefore, I agree to search relentlessly for your parents. But on one condition.”

Daragon groaned. “Not again.”

“Hey, nothing's free.”

“What is it this time?”

“I want you to read *Oliver Twist* out loud to me.”

Daragon crossed his arms over his new uniform. “But you can download the whole text anytime you want to. Isn't that more efficient?”

“In its own way, but downloading isn't the same.”

“You're probably right,” Daragon said, and agreed to the terms.

XI

Morning in the mansion, time to exercise again. Another day at work.

The sheets retracted, and Eduard crawled out, aching. His muscles were sore, even his bones felt somehow bruised. “I should take better care of my own body instead of just exercising Ob's all the time.” He wanted to remain in bed, but he didn't have that luxury. Not today, not any day.

Worse, his mouth tasted awful, as if Mordecai Ob had eaten cold squid and garlic. He rinsed with a strong mouthwash, but the foul flavor lingered. On mornings like this, Eduard gladly traded bodies with the Bureau Chief.

Out in the main conservatory, Ob sat in a white wrought-iron chair eating his breakfast. Eduard reported for duty, dressed in a nice suit, just in case Ob needed to go into BTL Headquarters.

“Have you eaten yet?” Ob hadn't bothered to change out of a thick bathrobe. “I'm going to need the energy for a long day.”

“Sorry.” Eduard bent over to the fruit plate and wolfed down some pineapple and bananas.

“Enough.” Ob gestured impatiently, and the two men hopped. After his stiffness and pains, Eduard breathed a sigh of relief to be in a fit body. The Bureau Chief bustled out of the conservatory without saying goodbye, in a hurry to be off to work.

Eduard sat back down in the white garden chair, wishing he could enjoy the remaining breakfast on the plate—but Ob had already eaten his fill, and this body was no longer hungry. Now Eduard had to run it off.

As he went into the gym to change from the bathrobe into exercise clothing, Eduard reminded himself that he was pampered here, living in a mansion with all the food and comfort he could want ... and he only had to do a few hours of exercise in a fine-tuned physique that *enjoyed* the physical workout. No problem.

Daragon came to visit the estate once every few weeks, ostensibly on a work-related errand. The BTL Chief was pleased with Daragon's work, and Eduard was happy for his friend. But he felt separated now, a servant who shouldn't engage in friendly chit-chat with a uniformed Inspector.

Eduard had plenty of quiet time to himself, though he was growing more and more dissatisfied. He often felt ill-used when he swapped back into his own body, sore and tired. He frequently had that foul taste in his mouth, and he couldn't understand why. What was Ob doing to him?

* * * *

Moving furtively in his own mansion, Mordecai Ob locked himself in his study. There would be time to go to BTL Headquarters later. He looked out into the leafy covering of hibiscus vines draped across the window; the foliage obscured his view, granting him the privacy he required. He couldn't let anyone see what he was doing.

As he prepared the items he needed, Ob let his mind wander. He was proud of Daragon, and he hadn't felt that way about a trainee in a long time. He worried how Daragon might react once Eduard was no longer useful, but by that time, the young Inspector would be so wrapped around Ob's finger that it wouldn't matter anymore. The Bureau Chief wouldn't be able to keep his secret forever. But he could last longer than Eduard....

So far, Daragon had restored some exhilaration to Ob's work. With the BTL running so smoothly, he had wondered if he could ever experience that excitement any more. He recalled when he himself had been so enthusiastic, so full of energy, so driven to do his work. But those days were long gone, swallowed in cynicism and boredom.

He ran the powerful Bureau of Tracing and Locations; he had more money than he knew what to do

with; and he felt as if he was doing a great service by apprehending criminals, finding fugitives, and reuniting families. However, as with so many celebrities and politicians who had everything they could possibly want, ennui had set in several years ago. Ob looked for ways to enjoy life again, challenges to face ... or at least some sort of stimulus.

It was then that he had fallen into the trap of Rush-X.

The potent, illegal drug was distilled from an extract of shellfish found off the Yucatán coast, a glistening powder like crushed pearls suspended in a glycerin solution, meant to be delivered under the tongue. BTL investigators had tracked down a major manufacturer of the drug, and the samples had come to Ob as evidence.

Over time, Rush-X caused a body to disintegrate, scrapping the neurons so that muscular control fell apart. Despite its known hazards, people paid enormous amounts and risked their own health just for the stimulus the drug provided.

At the time, Ob hadn't understood why.

When he had so much of the drug available to him, entrusted to him, Ob—against his better judgment in a moment of intense boredom and indecision—felt adrift. One dose couldn't cause significant harm, or so he'd hoped. The inventory had already been documented, and all the samples were to be incinerated. No one would question him, no one would notice a slight discrepancy.

Before he could change his mind, Ob had placed a vial of the pearly liquid under his tongue. He broke the thin gel capsule, and the drug penetrated soft sublingual tissues. At first it tasted awful, fishy and spicy, like squid and garlic, mixed with cleaning fluid.

Then the effect hit.

The experience was amazing. Though he had been bored and depressed, now his mind opened. He *cared* about things again. He was energized, exhilarated. In only a few seconds Mordecai Ob rediscovered a passion for life.

Later, because of his connections with the Bureau, he was able to get his hands on Rush-X often enough to keep his habit going. The contraband drug was destroyed weekly, and the Bureau Chief could “inspect” it whenever he wished.

But Ob had seen dying Rush-X addicts, and vowed never to let that happen to his own body, to let himself waste away for chemically induced thrills. Then he'd remembered his personal caretaker, and a solution came to him....

That had been years ago, and the glamour and drama of Rush-X had never grown old.

Now, inside Eduard's borrowed body, he leaned back in a padded chair inside his locked office. He cracked a vial of pearlescent frozen fire under his tongue ... just the precise amount. He rode the racecourse of energy that burned destructive flames through Eduard's flesh. As the euphoria hit, a smile froze on his face.

* * * *

As he finished his jogging circuit of the grounds, Eduard came across the quiet and introspective gardener. The massive Samoan wrestled with an ornamental tree, digging his feet into the ground and

trying to heave it upright so he could lash on a support strut. His arm muscles bulged, but he managed to prop up the support long before he exhausted himself. Finished, Tanu straightened the bindings and touched bent branches, like a fussy mother tugging the collar of her son's shirt.

Eduard stopped short, wiping sweat from Ob's forehead. He had made up his mind to ask an important question. Swallowing thick phlegm in a burning throat, he strode over to the gardener. "Tanu, you've worked here for a long time, haven't you? I need to ask you something."

The Samoan turned to him; his expression was open and uncertain. "Years," he said, his typical extensive conversation.

Eduard jogged in place to cool down. "You must see a lot of things going on around here at this estate."

The Samoan looked at him with sad, dark eyes. He nodded, then found the Japanese maple beside him intensely interesting. Tanu plucked a small leaf off a branch. Finally, after a long moment, he said, "You're not like the other ones."

Eduard raised his eyebrows. "Other ones? You mean Ob's previous trainers? How many have there been, besides me?"

Tanu looked longingly back at his trees. "Some."

"What happened to them?" Eduard couldn't imagine why anyone would give up such a plum of a job.

"They're gone."

This conversation was harder work than two hours of exercise. "Care to tell me about any of them?" The gardener refused to explain what was going on. "Well, I'm here to stay."

The Samoan looked back at him, dark eyes filled with infinite sadness.

XII

Daragon set out, armed with information and a set of thin active-screen images. For the first time in his life, he knew what his real mother looked like (at least what she looked like today). The woman lived in a much younger body now, and spent a great deal of time in a place called Club Masquerade. He could see her face to face—if he could maintain his nerve.

As he stood in front of the club entrance, Daragon took a moment to fuss with his appearance. He had worn nondescript clothes—a BTL Inspector's uniform would never do, not for this. Before heading out to the streets he had spent long minutes looking at himself in a mirror. He wanted to make a good impression.

He stepped inside the Club and stood motionless. Feeling wobbly, he scanned his handful of surveillance images again, though he had memorized every line in her face. *His mother's face*, though she couldn't possibly bear any physical similarity to him anymore. Maybe with his special vision he could see a similarity in her soul, a family resemblance.

The floor of Club Masquerade was a sea of people, lights, and music. He couldn't imagine how he'd ever identify a single person in the midst of such chaos, so many minds and gyrating bodies, each one

able to swap at will....

Then he spotted her, as if a telepathic link already existed between them.

She sat alone, waiting, available. Under the changing bath of lights, his mother looked healthy and sexy, flushed with a sheen of glitter and spray-on pheromones. She nibbled on a stim-stick, legs crossed on a floating stool as she hung by the bar.

Daragon stood frozen, watching her for a moment. He could see her aura, her identity, recognizing a flicker that bore connections to his own. He noted details in her *self* that were obviously related to him. This was her, no doubt about it.

With a bored and impatient expression, she scanned the people on the floor, looking for no one in particular—but definitely looking for *someone*. She leaned back languidly, tossing ginger hair over her shoulder.

Daragon marched up to her before his resolve could fail. He drew on all the confidence and firm body language he'd been taught in the BTL. He knew how to confront violent fugitives, but this seemed even more intimidating.

His mother's eyes locked with his. Her mouth tightened, then smiled as she appraised him. “Not a hint of hesitation.” She flashed a hungry smile. “You look like you know what you want.” She sat straighter, close to where he stood nonplussed. She wrapped her arms around his neck, to draw him down for a kiss.

“I—I just wanted to find you,” Daragon said. He paused a beat, took a deep breath. “You, you're my mother.”

Her bemused expression froze, then fell into a scowl. “What did you say?”

“I'm your son, but we've never met. You gave me away as an infant —” His words came in a rush.

“*That* baby? Ah, that was a long time ago.”

“I've always wondered about you. I wanted to know who you were, what you were doing. My own mother. I tried to track you down.”

“For what?” She was unimpressed. “That child came out of a different body. What does that matter to me?” She ran her fingers over his wrist, still trying to grasp his hand. Maliciously, she seemed more determined than ever. “It shouldn't matter to the two of us right now.”

Daragon withdrew, but she slid off the floating stool, more aggressive now. She kissed him, quickly and passionately, on the mouth. Daragon backed toward the dance floor, but she followed. “Stop! I just wanted to talk to you.”

“Why? Now you've got me intrigued. If you want us to get to know each other, I can think of a better way. What was your name again?” She pressed against him, rubbing hips and pushing the spongy firmness of her breasts against his ribs. “Don't you think this body is sexy? It's new, and I paid good money for it.”

“But you're my mother!”

“Kind of kinky, isn't it?” She laughed at him, made him feel small. “What are you worried about? Incest? That was an old, genetic-based taboo to prevent inbreeding. Nothing to worry about here.” Her voice got huskier. “Hey, not many people have a chance to try out something like this.”

Daragon stopped resisting and stood firm, remembering what Ob had taught him, remembering that he was a BTL Inspector. He couldn't let this woman dominate the conversation. This was *his* encounter, and he could take the lead. “Stop being so immature!” he snapped, using a voice of command. “You're supposed to be more of an adult than I am.”

She laughed. The music kept playing in the background, growing louder. People talked and chuckled, milling about. “It's obvious I'm older, yes. Today, someone else has the flesh that gave birth to you, and by now it's old. But you and I can still get it on, right now, just like two young, virile people.”

“I don't want to have sex with you, Mother. I want to know about you, know about my father.”

He could see bright recollections parading behind her retinas. “You might find it surprising, but I do remember the man who was your father—a very special man. We only had one night, and I could never find him again ... but then disappearing is what he was good at.”

She pulled Daragon closer so she could whisper in his ear with a hot breath that smelled of the spicy stim-stick. “Your father's been alive for a hundred years, hiding, swapping bodies every so often, staying out of the spotlight.” She chuckled. “But I guess he liked to get laid every once in a while.”

Daragon could barely believe what he was hearing.

“You'll never find him,” she continued. “He knows how to vanish, and it's been years. How long has it been, anyway? How old are you? In fact ... what did you say your name was?”

“I'm Daragon. I'm twenty-two.” Bitterness crept into his voice, resentment that his own mother had to ask him such questions.

She had managed to maneuver him out onto the dance floor. “I just want to stay young as long as I can—your father taught me that. Keep swapping bodies, keep yourself alive, trade up whenever you can. Is there something wrong with that?” She tried to press close, but now Daragon just wanted to be far away from her.

“Well, *I* don't have that option, Mother. I can't hopscotch at all—I'm an anomaly. I have to make do with what I have.” He finally pushed her away. “With what you gave me.”

“That was some other body. Don't get hung up about it. We can still —”

But Daragon turned and marched out of Club Masquerade, his hopes and illusions shattered.

XIII

Outside the window, the gardener's trowel chopped, chopped, *chopped*. Each blow pounded like thunder through Eduard's splitting skull.

He rolled off the narrow bed, feeling his muscles ache, his intestines twist. It felt as if he had the mother

of all hangovers. The afternoon sunlight hurt his eyes, piercing his pupils like little spears. Mordecai Ob had returned at midday asking to hopscotch back into his own form, and now Eduard felt so bad he had no choice but to take a nap, sleep it off.

Or try to.

Tanu worked in the flowerbed under his window. Just weeding. He might as well have been using a jackhammer.

Groaning, Eduard stared at the ceiling for several minutes until he stood up, trying to fight the wave of nausea. His ears rang, and a film of sweat broke out on his forehead. He must be afflicted with some kind of slow-acting flu. Eduard remembered selling his body, enduring all kinds of agony for a few credits. He could get through this, too. He just wanted to know what it was; then he could put it out of his mind.

He had already run a viral and bacteriological scan to see if he was getting sick, but he found no infections, no cold. And this didn't have the same *feel* as the severe illnesses he endured. Maybe Ob would let him go for a thorough medical scan, a professional assessment.

He looked forward to when he could swap into the boss's body, just to feel healthy again, for a change. He staggered over to the window and waved his hand to shift the polarized curtain film. Below, Tanu worked shirtless in the soil of a petunia bed. Normally at this time of day Eduard would have been up and around, reading or playing games.

Sweat trickled like oil down the gardener's bronzed back. He dug up old flowers, clearing the colorless bed for new flats of bachelor's buttons and phlox. Sensing the scrutiny, Tanu looked up, blinking in the afternoon sunshine.

Eduard stared through the window, seeing his ghost reflection: His own eyes were sunken, shadowed with pain, and his cheeks were gaunt. He wasn't doing well at all. When he pushed the controls to open the window, he noticed his hands quaking with an involuntary tremble. They'd never done that before.

"I didn't know working with flowers could be so loud." He rubbed his temples.

Tanu looked at him for a long moment, then hung his head. "It's happening again." He gathered an armful of the wilting petunias he had just uprooted.

Eduard leaned out the window, but the smell of the fresh air and plants and soil made him queasy. "What? What's happening again?" Tanu trudged away toward an enclosure where he dumped his mulch.

"Hey, Tanu!" The desperate sound in Eduard's voice struck a chord in the gardener, because he slowly turned around. "What happened to Ob's other physical trainers? Why did they quit this job? I need to know."

The Samoan shook his head; the rustling petunias quivered in his arms.

"At least tell me who the last one was. What was his name?"

"Sandor, his name was Sandor Perun. But he never took the time to talk to me, like you do."

No matter how much Eduard pleaded, Tanu refused to offer any further details and went back to his gardening. But now at least Eduard had a name to track down, a place to start.

Eduard took several potent analgesics, stood under a gushing hot shower until he felt refreshed enough to tackle his questions. He went the main COM terminals in Ob's mansion. Time to do a little hunting.

* * * *

On the interactive filmscreen he searched through the jungle of information, trying to track down Mordecai Ob's previous personal trainers. Any connections with the Bureau and BTL business were naturally restricted, but the workings of Ob's private estate should be subject to the same COM-accessible requirements as any other piece of public information.

Sandor Perun. Eduard found a subset of data behind several pseudonyms and translucent filenames. First step, clear. He opened up the relevant information on employment at Ob's estate, searching for the man's hiring history.

To his astonishment, he uncovered a recently placed posting for a new job. His own job. *He's already looking for a new physical trainer!* Without saying a word to Eduard, Ob intended to replace him. He glanced at the interview notice, read the words. Identical job description, identical pay; starting time, “in the near future.”

“You bastard,” Eduard mumbled.

Working through the computer network, he then found the previous employment listings, his own file—and then the file for Sandor Perun. But that wasn't all: Before Sandor was Janine Kuritz, and before her was Benjamin Padwa.

When Eduard tried to uncover details of these former employees, he found no further record. No information at all. COM had no listings of what they had done after leaving service here. Even their medical records had been entirely cleansed. But Eduard had sketchy leads, and continued for hours, obsessed. Anger and ice grew inside him.

He didn't know how long it would be until Ob returned, and he didn't want to let his boss know he had discovered the secret treachery. Furious, his fingers like knives, he stabbed at the keys and erased his search.

His own body felt like hell, growing worse every day. Was it some mysterious ailment or poisoning? Had the previous trainers suffered the same thing as he was feeling now? What was going on?

Everything about this too-good-to-be-true job, everything about this estate, seemed grim. Eduard didn't dare trust anyone but himself until he found some answers.

XIV

Another morning. As he settled into Eduard's home-body, Mordecai Ob stood scowling. He flexed the sore, weakening muscles and tried to mask an expression of bone-deep pain. In a voice dripping with disappointment, he said, “You feel like crap.”

Eduard's look of relief at being inside Ob's healthy body annoyed the man even more. “I don't know what it is. I'd hoped it would get better by now. And the awful taste in my mouth —”

“It's your problem, Eduard, not mine,” Ob said with a scowl. “You're getting to be a liability to me. Your

exercise and body-training work is satisfactory, but it's hard for me to concentrate when I'm in a body that feels this bad." He still hadn't had the guts to confess that he'd been looking for a replacement trainer.

Eduard didn't know what to do, didn't know what to say. The Bureau Chief sighed in disgust and shooed him out of the study. "Go on! You've got a workout to do. Make sure that I feel good when I come back home. I have an important teleconference meeting that requires a great deal of privacy. Don't disturb me."

Eduard departed, trying to hide the flare of anger in his eyes.

* * * *

Ob sealed the door to his private sanctum, leaving himself with a view of the leafy screen of hibiscus vines that covered the single window. Using Eduard's trembling hands, he popped open the bottom desk drawer to reveal a velvet-lined case of small vials, each one a concentrated dose of Rush-X, confiscated from the drug-incineration protocol. Every vial contained astonishing ecstasy, a powerhouse of sensations that made a jaded and tired Bureau Chief feel alive once again.

Eduard had been his addiction-receptacle for a long time now, but the young physical trainer was nearing the end of his usefulness. Ob had reconfigured the ampoules to increase the dosage; Eduard's body had grown so accustomed to Rush-X that he needed more and more of the drug to give him a full fix—but he had reached the limits. A larger amount would be quite dangerous, even for a body that had already tolerated so much.

Once again he shuddered with the horror of what might have happened had he used the drug in his own body, instead of a surrogate like Eduard. Ob knew there was a chance he might get caught, and so he had used his full resources to set up the trainer to take a fall. He had even planted several vials of Rush-X and related paraphernalia in Eduard's quarters, which Ob could conveniently find, if necessary.

He withdrew the fragile vial and held it. The delicate, dissolvable gel that held the pearlescent liquid would break in his mouth, letting the vibrant fluid dribble under his tongue. Eager, he raised it to his lips.

Then the video screen rang on his desk, demanding his attention. The tone was so loud and sharp that his jittery fingers nearly crushed the ampoule. Regaining his composure, Ob hid the small vial from view. His mouth was dry.

As the COM screen focused, Inspector Daragon's image stared back at him, attentive and expectant. The dark-haired man was neatly dressed, his dark uniform freshly groomed and pressed. Daragon always took his appearance so seriously. His almond eyes were flinty and severe.

"Sir," he said without waiting for a response, "you and I had our caseload meeting scheduled for this morning. I'm in Bureau HQ, but I understand you're working at home today. Would a teleconference discussion suit you instead?"

Ob controlled his surprise; he had been so intent on the morning's drug fix that he'd forgotten entirely about his scheduled meetings. "I apologize for not being there as promised. I've been very busy here and needed to handle several urgent matters from home."

"I understand, sir." His voice was so calm, his demeanor so professional. Ob wondered what he had done to engender such loyalty. Daragon was probably the best of the lot, the finest achievement the BTL could hope for. It made him ashamed to realize how far from the mark he himself had fallen.

Concisely, Daragon summarized his cases, updating Ob on the progress in numerous fugitive hunts and investigations. Ob pretended to listen, tried to keep his face an interested mask while the back of his mind clamored for the drug. He felt the slick ampoule in his sweaty fingers. Would Daragon never finish? *Why did he take so many cases, and why did he have so damned much progress to report?* Ob fidgeted in the chair.

Finally Daragon summed up, then hesitated. Ob pursed his lips impatiently. “Is there something else, Inspector?” Perhaps the sharp edge in his voice would turn Daragon away so he could be alone again at last.

“Sir, I have to comment. You're not looking at all well. Eduard's body seems to be experiencing severe medical stress.”

Ob's shoulders slumped. “I'm sorry to inform you that your friend just isn't working out very well.” He raised a hand, palm up, to cut off excuses or pleas. “He exercises well and does his job. Unfortunately, he just doesn't take care of his home-body with the same dedication, and I have to deal with this discomfort.” He looked somberly at the screen. “I've given him every possible chance.”

Daragon frowned. “I understand, sir. I'm very concerned about Eduard. Have you taken him to see specialists?”

“He says they can't find anything,” he lied. “And I'm afraid I can't put up with it anymore. I've already hired his replacement. My new personal trainer starts in a few days. I do hope Eduard recovers from whatever personal problems he has, but I've simply got too many vital Bureau duties to tolerate this kind of distraction.”

Daragon nodded crisply. “I see your point, sir. I had counted on him to do better. I hope you aren't upset with me for bringing Eduard to your attention.”

“It was nothing you could have predicted. Sometimes people just ... let you down.” Ob reached forward to the screen controls. “Now, if you'll excuse me. I have important matters before me.”

“Yes, sir.” Daragon dutifully signed off.

Ob clawed at the vial in his hands, opened his mouth and slipped it in. His jaws cracked down—and the blessed flood of inspiration soared into his system.

* * * *

While he jogged, Eduard wished the exhilarating feeling would never stop. Ob's muscles felt so strong, so well conditioned. In the evenings, the constant ache inside his home-body made him exhausted and sluggish. Eduard had been unable to function much beyond eating and sleeping and waiting for the next morning when he could live in Ob's body again. He didn't enjoy life anymore.

The night before, Eduard had stumbled out onto the walkway and fell to his knees in the cool air as the wind rustled the tall blue spruces. He coughed and dry-heaved on the walkway. Though he turned his stomach inside-out, his guts produced nothing, spewed out no toxins.

Each day it had gotten worse.

As he huddled on his hands and knees in the darkness, he'd looked over to the gardener's brightly lit cottage, quiet and peaceful. Eduard considered going to Tanu, but he simply felt too bad. He couldn't

present himself like this.

Now, though, wearing Ob's home-body, everything felt right again. It reminded him of the way a healthy human being should function. He ran along the extended jogging course, beyond the “wall” where he ceased to concentrate on what his muscles doing. He entered a fugue state where his existence was centered upon running, running.

Then the Samoan gardener stepped in front of him, and Eduard barely snapped out of his trance in time. The look of concern upon Tanu's face shocked him. He stumbled to a halt, kicking up pea gravel under his running shoes.

Eduard panted too much to say anything, and finally the gardener spoke. “This has gone on too long. I must ... must show you something.”

Eduard drew a deep sigh, astonished. “You've always kept your mouth shut before. What changed your mind?”

“I saw you last night, how sick you were. This isn't right.” He swallowed hard, and his sinewy neck seemed barely able to contain his Adam's apple. “It's not what you agreed to do. You have to know what Master Ob is doing. To you.”

Eduard felt a jab of fear. “Has he hired somebody already?” He lowered his voice. “I've done everything that bastard —”

“You have done more than you know. You were my friend, Eduard. I don't want to see you go. I don't want to see you die.”

“Die? What's going on?”

Tanu gestured for Eduard to accompany him. They crept along the side wing of the mansion, keeping out of view from the windows. They moved to the outside of Ob's private offices. The brick walls were overgrown with thick vines: morning glories and hibiscus, full of sweet, heady perfume. Tanu put a finger to his lips, and they approached the main window in Ob's study.

Thick hibiscus leaves and flowers masked the outside of the glass. Tanu indicated for him to move forward and look. Eduard's heart pounded more heavily than when he exercised hard. His stomach knotted—but he had to know. He slipped over the decorative flowers right up to the window and parted the leaves. Bees flew around his head but he paid no attention to them.

Inside the private office, behind a locked door, the Bureau Chief sat at his desk, complacent about security precautions. In Eduard's body, he leaned back with his eyes glazed and milky. His hands were spread out, tapping with fine tremors on the desktop. A thin line of spittle ran down his chin.

In an open case, Eduard saw the individual vials of a milky substance....

“You son of a bitch,” he said under his breath. The pieces dropped into place like broken glass shards falling from above. He wanted to smash through the window to grab the man by the collar. Ob had known full well what was wrong with Eduard, why he felt so awful all the time. But he had lied.

Sandor and Janine and Benjamin—the previous trainers. Eduard was next in line, to be used up by the man's raging addiction. Ob's new trainer, his new victim, would start in a few days—a fresh body to

destroy. And Eduard would probably vanish, just like the others.

He backed from the window, his face red, his head pounding. Ob had been *using him*, and Eduard had been the perfect patsy. Trembling, he stepped away from the vine-covered glass.

Tanu frowned, frightened and sad. “There's still time for you to get away. Run. Swap bodies with someone, do it again and again until you're lost—or he'll find you.”

But Eduard couldn't think of running off in Mordecai Ob's body. With all the resources of the Bureau of Tracing and Locations, he would stop at nothing to get his body back before Eduard could talk.

Disturbed, Tanu shook his shaggy head. “I won't help you, Eduard.”

Eduard walked with the burly gardener down the path, brooding in silence. Finally he said, “I'll take care of this problem myself. In my own way.”

XV

Knowing he could not turn back, Eduard lay awake at night, his nostrils flared, his blood boiling as he seethed through plan after rejected plan.

He was safe for now, as long as he remained in his own aching body. The Bureau Chief was a coward, and wouldn't risk the slightest damage to his own physique ... not when he could destroy Eduard's body whenever he wanted.

Finally, when Ob went out at night in his healthy home-body, citing important Bureau business, Eduard dashed barefoot through the corridors of the mansion until he reached the locked door of the private study.

The hall lights stood out like glaring eyes, and the rooms were filled with shadows. Ob had been a feared leader of the powerful BTL for too long, and here in his own sanctum the man had become lax with security. The door was locked by a simple deadbolt; with a few minor tools and a tiny magnetic device, Eduard was able to let himself into the office.

The study door creaked open like the gateway to a haunted house. Inside, Eduard found other secrets and plans. Neatly stacked on a corner of the desk were papers, pictures, a portfolio of someone named Candace Chu, who was scheduled to report for work in three days. Eduard stared at the face in the image. This would be his own replacement.

A red haze filled his vision, anger great enough to drive off the marrow-deep aches. Once he got away from here, once Ob stopped poisoning his body, Eduard wondered if he'd recuperate, or if the damage was already too deep, beyond repair.

A quick search revealed only one locked desk drawer; Eduard fiddled with the cheap metal tongue, popping it down to uncover Ob's drug stash, which wasn't even well hidden. The man was so arrogant! Apparently, a BTL Chief didn't fear anything the way normal people did.

Eduard removed the sealed box. His hands were trembling, both from his damaged nerves and also with anticipation. He popped open the case and inside, nestled in folds of velvet, were four fragile vials holding a whitish pearlescent fluid. Eduard held one tube up to the light, and his skin crawled.

He removed all of the ampoules, pocketing them, then clicked the box shut to hide his theft. It wasn't a skilled job, but Ob would suspect nothing. *Yet* . Any man with such clumsy locks couldn't be paranoid about anyone stealing his drug stash.

He wouldn't have to fool the Bureau Chief for long.

Eduard returned the empty box to the drawer and reset the locks, restoring the office to the way it had been. As he dimmed the lights and turned toward the door, he glanced a final time at the image of Candace Chu. An optimistic young woman, convinced she had landed a miracle job. Yeah, right. He remembered that feeling.

Eduard smiled wryly at her narrow face, her bright eyes, and her anticipatory smile. “You'll thank me for this, if you ever learn the truth.”

Then he closed the office door behind him, running back to his rooms, where he locked himself in. He lay awake for hours staring at the ceiling and the shadows in the corners, anticipating and dreading what he intended to do the next day....

* * * *

The boundary between friendship and duty was a blurred line for Daragon.

He sat in his computer center at the undersea Headquarters, not seeing his caseload summaries. He had become a prominent Inspector, the well-known pet of Mordecai Ob. Daragon didn't want to do anything that might risk his future with the BTL.

With his ability to *see* the identity of a fugitive, he'd become an extremely valuable Inspector, perhaps one of the most crucial employees in the Bureau. He had received accolades and commendations ... but Daragon's most coveted reward was just to continue doing his job and doing it well. And having his mentor, Bureau Chief Ob, proud of him.

Still, it deeply bothered him that Eduard had turned out so irresponsible. Daragon felt as if he himself was to blame. He had thought Eduard would be perfect for the position—obviously he'd been wrong. Daragon worked so hard on his tasks that he couldn't imagine why Eduard would slack off. What more did he want?

But Eduard had always been willing to bend the rules, to take shortcuts, create opportunities for himself. Because of their friendship, Daragon had discounted those personality flaws. He had been blind, and now he'd have to pay the price.

Daragon left the computer room, marching to the BTL transport depot. Eduard had let him down, but he hoped he could talk to his friend, work out some sort of compromise to salvage the situation. He suspected it was already too late. Ob's new personal trainer would start soon. But he had to try. Daragon would take this one last chance for his friend, no matter what Eduard had done in the past.

Setting his jaw, he flew away from the ocean platform, setting a course for the Bureau Chief's estate.

* * * *

Next morning, meek and subservient, Eduard came to meet his employer with lowered eyes. He stood ready to hopscotch for the last time. *The last time* . Ob touched Eduard's temples, and the two of them swapped. The Bureau Chief scowled at his trainer's body in disgust. “I can't tolerate this any longer,

Eduard.”

With great difficulty, Eduard held his anger in check. How dare Ob complain about such things, when it was his own addiction that had caused the debilitation? He drew a deep breath, feeling refreshed and vibrant. *This* body moved the way it was supposed to, without pain—too bad it wasn't his own. He looked through a stranger's eyes, seeing the weariness and the jitters, the sallow skin, sunken eyes of his home-body.

Ob said, “I have a meeting this morning, but I need to see you briefly after lunch. We'll swap back and then ... then we have to talk.”

Eduard nodded. “Yes, sir. I understand.”

Ob paid no attention to him after that. The Bureau Chief had never treated Eduard as more than a worker, someone who exercised his muscles, maintained his beloved body in perfect workable shape. A disposable human being...

Halfway through his exercise routine, Eduard came to a sudden stop and asked himself why he was spending so much time and effort. “It doesn't matter a bit, not any more.” Then he began to laugh at the idea.

Eduard took a petty pleasure in stumbling sideways, brushing against a hedge and scratching himself along the legs and arms. *My, wouldn't that upset Master Ob ?* He decided to go to his rooms and just enjoy the pleasant sensations of a healthy prime-condition body for a change.

Tanu, always silent, always watching, looked up as he saw Eduard striding back to his apartment long before the exercise routine should have finished. The gardener frowned, then went back to tending his rose bushes.

Eduard watched the clock as the hours slowly passed. He took a luxurious shower and stretched out on his bed. His mind was tired, but the body felt well-rested. Ob, no doubt, had slept well, a peaceful slumber without worries. Why should he be concerned? Eduard's body was paying for his sins.

When it was time, all of Eduard's nervousness and anticipation turned to cold iron inside of him. He had made up his mind.

Wearing Ob's body, he stood outside the door to the Chief's private study, where the man waited for him. He hesitated and took a deep breath. In the palm of his hand he held the last four stolen vials of the pearlescent drug. Deftly he slid the small cylinders one at a time into his mouth, tucking them on both sides of his tongue and up behind his teeth. He hoped he didn't look like a chipmunk. He would have to keep his head down. Luckily, Ob wasn't much of a conversationalist.

He knocked on the heavy door, and when Ob told him to enter, Eduard strode forward, breathing through his nose, keeping his lips clamped shut, his gaze averted. He just wanted to swap back out of this doomed body.

From behind his desk, the sickly-looking form of Eduard stood up. “You're late. I expected you ten minutes ago. I've got things to do.”

Eduard grunted noncommittally and came closer.

Then Ob hesitated, thinking of something. Eduard could feel the fragile dissolving gel in his mouth. He couldn't swallow, couldn't move. He didn't even know how quickly the drug would act.

Ob pointed a finger at him. "We have business to discuss, Eduard. It's about your employment with me, and your performance on my behalf."

Why was Ob talking *now*? Why didn't he swap first and then continue with his lecture? Eduard just nodded, blinking his eyes dully. Ob considered him little more than livestock anyway. He wouldn't expect an intelligent reply.

As Ob came toward him, he stopped again, hesitating in extreme annoyance as he noticed the rosebush scratches on Eduard's arm and the side of his leg. "You've done it again! This is inexcusable. Your employment is terminated!"

Eduard reached forward and grabbed Ob's temples, and the man responded automatically. "Yes indeed. I can't stand being in this form any more."

Eduard bit down, shattering all four vials in his mouth.

The instant before he swapped, he felt a cold, awful-tasting fire surge through the sensitive tissues in his gums, under his tongue, and through the roof of his mouth. Now he knew the source of the horrible taste he'd lived with for so many months. He felt a lightning-storm begin to surge through his mind, through his nerves —

Then his mind was displaced, flicked across the gulf ... and he found himself in his own aching body again. Back home.

The look of wide-eyed horror on Ob's face was comical. He grabbed his throat, swallowed convulsively, then opened his mouth and spat out the chunks of already dissolving gel.

Eduard burst out in hysterical laughter. "Surprise!"

Ob blinked his eyes, but already his vision glazed.

Eduard narrowed his eyes, ferocious now. "How do you like the taste, Master Ob? It's your own body this time. And I gave you four vials of that drug. Enjoy the sensation."

"Four!" Ob gasped, his voice strangled. "Rush-X ... four!"

During his addiction, Eduard's body had developed a tolerance, but Ob's perfectly tended body was clean. It had no resistance. One vial would probably have been more Rush-X than he could handle.

And now four were coursing through his system.

Ob staggered forward, stretching out his hands. "Swap back!"

But Eduard easily stepped away from the disoriented man. "Yeah, right. You've caused me enough problems. See what you've been doing to me all along?" He leaned forward like a vulture. "Did all your trainers die, Master Ob, or did you simply discard them before it was too late?"

Ob slumped to the carpeted floor, his fingers clenched in a clawlike grasp. Then his face grew slack,

subsiding into an idiot grin. His eyes became metallic, and drool poured out of the sides of his mouth. He coughed and shuddered and twitched.

Eduard had never been so glad to be back in his own body, despite its flaws, despite its weaknesses and its degenerating condition. But it was *his* body. He stood over Ob as he degenerated into a quivering mass on the rug. The Bureau Chief's crotch darkened as he lost bladder control.

He wondered with brief remorse if he could possibly call a medical team. Maybe they would be able to revive him. But that wouldn't make anything better. By now Ob would be severely brain-damaged, a vegetable.

Eduard took another step away, wearing a self-satisfied smile as he watched Mordecai Ob die....

Then the anger washed out of him like cold water draining from a basin. He'd gotten his revenge, poetic justice against the man who had addicted his body to Rush-X. Ob had chewed up one trainer after another with his need for thrills.

But Eduard had just murdered him.

He suddenly became paralyzed as he realized what he had done. Perhaps he could claim that it was some odd form of self-defense—but he had killed the Chief of the Bureau of Tracing and Locations, a vastly powerful man. His fellow Beetles would never rest until they captured Eduard. And, no matter what excuses he tried to make, Eduard knew he had committed murder. There was no other word for it.

Eduard had been impulsive before, and done ill-advised things, but he had *planned* this. He had spent a day setting it up. It was premeditated.

He looked around, trying to decide what to do. He had to get away, take Tanu's advice, swap from one body to another to another, on the run. He would move on, begin a different, desperate phase of his life.

He turned, leaving the still-twitching corpse on the floor—then he heard footsteps in the hall after a door closed. An identity chime rang through the intercom system. "It's Daragon, Mr. Ob. I'm here for our appointment ... and I'd also like to see Eduard, if that's all right."

Boots clumped on the floor, and Eduard heard him coming toward the study. Daragon, his former friend, who was now totally devoted to the BTL. Especially to Mordecai Ob. He would never listen to what Eduard had to say.

As Daragon came down the corridor, unsuspecting, Eduard knew he was trapped. But perhaps he had just enough time....

He picked up the desk chair and hurled it through the window masked by hibiscus vines. The glass shattered, and the chair hung up on the green tendrils. But it was enough for Eduard to scramble through.

Hearing the glass break, Daragon ran. "Mr. Ob!"

As Eduard climbed to the windowsill, pushing himself through the vines, Daragon burst into the office. From across the room, his dark eyes met Eduard's fearful gaze.

Eduard froze. "I'm sorry, Daragon." Then he dropped to ground level. He would never have a chance to explain more. He would never see his friend again—if he could survive the next few minutes.

Daragon noticed his mentor sprawled on the floor. “Mr. Ob! My God!” He fell to his knees, grabbed the man by his shoulders, touched his cheeks. He saw the drool and the drugs, felt the oily-slick perspiration covering the man's already cold skin. He felt for a pulse but found none.

“Eduard, come back!” He sprang to his feet and ran to the broken window, ripping vines aside. Eduard sprinted across the estate grounds toward the gated exit.

Hearing the shouts, the huge Samoan gardener hurried toward the office from the outside.

Daragon crawled through the smashed window, tearing his neat, dark uniform. He jerked vines away from his face, scrambling through, dropping to the ground—and Tanu stood there, stopping him.

“What is it?” the gardener said in a deep voice. “What's happened?”

Daragon looked after Eduard. “Not now!”

But Tanu grabbed his arm, clumsily trying to stall the Inspector. “Tell me! I should know.”

Daragon yanked himself free. The big gardener moved as if to stall him again, but Daragon ducked under his massive arm and ran. “Damn you, Eduard!” His former friend dashed through the gate and out into the streets, where the bustle swallowed him.

Behind him, Tanu shoved his broad, tanned shoulders into the broken window frame. Inside the room, he saw Mordecai Ob sprawled on the floor, and he knew exactly what had happened. He hung his head, staring sadly.

Far behind now, Daragon shouted in pursuit. But Eduard had always been good at running

Now Eduard would use the skills he had learned over the years, trade his body for another, and another. He would flee from person to person, never keeping one particular face for long. Away from the estate grounds and into the city, he had all of humanity in which to hide, as long as he could stay one step ahead of his friend.

Not exactly the next phase he had planned for his life, Eduard thought, but he would cope, somehow. Eduard was a survivor.

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