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Afterburn
by Rajnar Vajra
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Science Fiction

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Paul

I jump into a small black boat. Perhaps it's made of wood. I can't tell if I'm sitting or standing. I see no oars. The boat autonomously leaves its dock and floats away on the grim turquoise river, following some dark agenda rather than any natural current. I am bone marrow weary but it could be suicidal to relax. There may be enemies nearby. I don't see any, but that doesn't mean a thing.

I am too exposed now, too far from the sandy riverbanks, gliding though this underground purgatory lit only by Ferrari-size torches that burn red, blue, or green. I need those torches, but God, how I hate them! Drusy stalactites catch their light, blend it, and hurl it into my face like a mortal insult from rainbows. My sore eyes are constantly whipped with glints and streaks. And in this place, above all, I need good vision.

I admit that these endless caves are impressive. Tall enough for clouds to form and rain or snow to fall. Right now, the stony skies are clear but that could change in an instant. Everything can change in an instant.

The boat lacks a tiller, but I get a sudden sense that my right hand is gripping something invisible that provides me a measure of directional control, something alien to this world but obscurely related to it. I've had this sensation before, always mingled with irrational bittersweet nostalgia. But as a rule, I can't feel my hands. So I can't explain how one fearsome weapon or another so consistently hovers nearby, ready for another desperate use, as if I were holding it in front of me. And I can't explain how I manage to change weapons at will, or aim and fire them.

Very rarely, the entire world unaccountably thins and I can dimly see my arms. That is, I think they are mine. Those are terrible moments because there is something terribly wrong with those arms. And when I glimpse my hands or seem to glimpse them, I dare not count fingers because so many are missing. The left hand is the worst -- red, black, white, and shriveled -- adorned with shiny yellow, unnatural growths.

But I am too afraid for my life to worry for long about anything else. Enemies can come from anywhere, and from any direction including from beneath and, in one horrid instance, from within.

* * * *

Sue Williams and Carla Carroll

"I've seen something like this before," Sue remarked in a voice more suitable for a library or a funeral.

A thin line appeared between Carla's gray eyebrows. "I'd assume so."

Sue flushed. The hardest thing about transferring to a new hospital was the way even her fellow physicians would take one look at her and commence the usual assumptions. "I'm not talking about aquariums, Doctor. I've seen tanks much like this intended for people."

The pale eyebrows compressed then sprang up. "You have? Where?"

"In movies. On -- " Sue grimaced slightly " -- on TV. It's a surprisingly common theme. Maybe that's what gave him the idea."

The older woman tried to brush her annoyance aside. Newcomers always had idiosyncratic reactions to Unit Seventeen and the leaking subsonics didn't help. "Well, this one is real. And so far, I daresay, unique."

"You mean there aren't sixteen others?"

Carla stared at her trainee for a moment, surprised. The question was clearly intended as a joke. Unit Seventeen had been named as such because basement-room seventeen was the only large space that the hospital could make available for the experiment. Until this moment, the younger woman had seemed too stiff to appreciate jokes let alone crack one.

Sue placed a finger tentatively against the warm tank. "Such thick glass! And with all that liquid, I'd think the system must be incredibly heavy."

"Actually, your 'glass' is plastic. But you're right. Neoperflubron, even with softening agents and scar inhibitors added, weighs almost twice as much as water liter for liter. Unit Seventeen, including all its ... contents, weighs over four tons."

Susan braced herself to look past the ghostly reflections of the room's many ready lights and stare again into the heart of the tank, but her eyes kept sliding away. She mumbled something very quietly.

"What that?" Carla asked.

Susan was embarrassed to realize she'd spoken aloud. "Sorry. I was just thinking that the Chronicle once called him 'the most eligible bachelor in San Francisco.'"

* * * *

Paul

I see what is undoubtedly my next destination, a narrow island that bifurcates the river perhaps a half mile ahead. A very tall structure looms on that island. It could be a castle or a bizarre skyscraper, or something new and outlandish. I can't tell from here because it is sheathed in mist. But I don't like the looks of it.

My boat accelerates as it approaches the island and I think, for one naive instant, that there won't be any trouble until I set foot on dry land. But a new kind of enemy appears. There are two of them high in the air, both behind me. They look like inflated wasps or grotesquely painted, segmented balloons. They lack wings but fly effortlessly. They have thin, insect arms ending in huge lobster claws. One opens its mouth and something darts out.

I am frozen with terror because it seems to be spitting fire at me. That, I can't have! But, no. It isn't fire headed my way, only a knife, spinning, catching the relentless torchlight.

Fine. My current weapon is a rocket-launcher. I aim it at one enemy and quickly release two rockets. Then I dodge the knife by moving a step to the left, being careful to avoid falling out of the boat. I have learned to distrust these waters.

My rockets are swift, but the first enemy avoids them both and spits forth three more knives. The second enemy belches forth two daggers of its own. I am in serious trouble. Again.

* * * *

Sue Williams and Troy Dane

Troy strode into the room quickly for such a heavy man, studied the readouts, and then visibly relaxed before turning toward Sue. "Doctor Williams? I'm Troy Dane."

Sue tried to look professional and intelligent, but was certain it was a lost cause. She'd recognized the familiar sequence of surprise, recognition,

and then swift judgment on Troy's broad face. Once again, she'd been weighed on the scales of her notoriety and found wanting. This time, at least, the typical signs of sexual curiosity were absent. Perhaps the man was in love ... or gay.

She took a breath, determined to at least sound competent. "Sorry to call you down, Doctor, but there was some sudden heavy brain activity and his adrenaline, cortisol, and norepinephrine rose sharply. Neuropeptides are still miles above his baseline."

"And?"

The noncommittal response flustered Sue a bit. "I wouldn't have bothered you, but Doctor Carroll, who's been training me on this equipment, isn't answering her beeper."

Troy smiled reassuringly and instinctively lifted a massive arm to pat Sue on the shoulder, then reconsidered when he saw her start to flinch. He lowered the arm awkwardly. "Carla's probably sleeping like a baby; she hasn't had much rest since your, ah, predecessor quit. I'm sure she explained to you the pain-reduction system we're using here." He didn't sound sure.

"More or less." Sue interpreted this as a test and resolved grimly to pass with honors. "As I understand it, the electromagnetic fields that provide alignment and stimulation to his new cell-scaffolds are also being applied to his brain, generating random stimuli, blocking out both pain-signals and hypothalamic wake-up calls."

Troy opened his mouth then closed it without saying anything.

Sue didn't notice. "And four to six times an hour, a strong forty-cycle pulse is applied to his entire reticular formation, sending him into intense dream states."

"True enough. But you've left off something. As you probably know, we're trying to keep him, um, somewhat afraid in there." Troy aimed a thumb toward the tank. "Loud, low-frequency sound is the ticket. It was his idea that organisms might heal faster if they feel threatened. The theory is unproven, to say the least, but since he can only stay in there for such a limited time..."

"It's worth trying something radical that might speed up his regeneration. I do understand. But according to these readouts, he's not in one of the peak stimulation phases at the moment."

Troy tilted his chin back. "Now, I get you! We don't know why or how, but he's recently taken to, uh, instigating some internal stimulation on occasion. At first, we were alarmed. But it didn't seem to do him any lasting harm and perhaps it's even led to some small acceleration in the, um, process."

Susan nodded stiffly. "Doctor Carroll mentioned that, but she didn't say that the readings would get this high. I don't want to overreact, but I was taught to choose safe over sorry." Christ, she thought, when did I start talking like such a pompous ass?

Troy glanced at her speculatively. "Safe over sorry? You're right, of course, but I'm afraid that, uh, pioneers are seldom safe and often sorry. This is all ... terra incognita. But I'd like you to answer a question and please be absolutely honest: how are you feeling at this very moment?"

"Well, somewhat ... on edge, to tell the truth. It's probably my imagination, but I keep feeling like something's about to go -- " Susan frowned as she hesitated " -- horribly wrong."

"Aha! That's our subsonics at work. They'll ruin a good mood every time. We've tried to confine the vibration to the tank by having phase canceling speakers built into the walls here, but the system isn't perfect. I'm used to this place, but just standing here, I always get this feeling of impending doom."

"Is that so? Doctor Carroll warned me that the subsonics might make me 'just a tad jittery.'" She'd made quotation marks with brusque finger motions.

Dane shifted his weight and smiled unconvincingly. "She probably didn't want you getting nervous about getting nervous."

"What makes me nervous is when people don't trust me. But why do we need the subsonics running continually?"

The big man's smile became more genuine. "Good question! We've tried shutting them off several times. Each time, the patient became nearly comatose and his metabolism slowed accordingly. If you want my intuitive opinion, I think he was right. I think that fear is his best friend."

"Then wouldn't it be possible to monitor all this from another room?"

"Well, we thought of that, certainly. But it's hard to see the, um, subtleties of his behavior over a video monitor. Those little twitches can be significant. And, as I'm sure you were told, on occasion we have to make instant decisions and adjustments. That's why we need a trained expert standing by at all times." Troy glanced at his watch.

"Thank you, Doctor," Sue said quietly. "You've been very helpful. I'll try not to bother you again."

"Don't hesitate to call if you need me. And don't expect too much from yourself. There's a reason why we have a high turnover on this job."

* * * *

Paul

By alternately crouching, dodging, and jumping, I elude three salvos of knives. One blade I see just an instant too late. It comes in spinning too fast to stick, but hits hard enough to pierce my armor. A sickening pain blossoms between my left shoulder and left nipple. I don't know how bad I'm hurt; I can't see or touch my chest. The pain is severe, but not nearly as bad as my initial injuries in this place. The first time I was stabbed, I blacked out. I've never understood why that creature who stabbed me didn't finish me off. The latest monsters are getting harder and harder to kill but their abuse seems progressively less agonizing.

I hurriedly switch weapons, selecting one I think might work best against the bloated wasps: an energy-beam emitter whose disadvantage is that the beam fizzles out after two seconds, rendering the emitter useless for hours. I only dare to use it in an emergency, but this certainly qualifies.

My aim has been improving steadily and before the weapon fails, both my attackers are shredded, their dismembered body-parts bobbing in the river, which begins bubbling white everywhere flesh has fallen. I try not to dwell on why the water is bubbling, or how much my chest hurts, or on how much blood I must be losing. Dwelling on trouble always makes it worse. The secret is to just keep going, and before too long, all injuries will be forgotten. I have no idea why this happens, but I have no time to ponder mysteries.

The structure on the island seems to be an ancient ruined cathedral. Its granite outer walls are cracked and its roof had, at one point, apparently exploded upwards leaving only twisted metal beams that nearly scrape the limestone ceiling so high above. The building is immense enough for gods to assemble and worship each other. The polished marble doors, a good hundred feet high, swing open soundlessly as I approach. Getting into buildings is rarely this easy. But as I accept the invitation and step inside, the doors swing closed behind me and I hear the clank of a mighty lock snapping shut. In all likelihood, I will not be leaving this way, assuming I ever have the chance to leave.

The vestibule is long and dark, but with the wall-cracks and open roof, I can see another set of doors ahead. River sounds are absent here, replaced with ominously deep creaking and skirls of strange music. Someone may be playing a harmonium nearby, and many voices are producing something akin to Gregorian chanting. These out-of-tune voices are mostly so inhumanly low-pitched that I fervently hope to never run into the choir.

As I approach the new and far smaller doorway, the floor begins to glow, which makes the puzzle waiting for me at the vestibule's far end brightly visible. This puzzle is a purposeful arrangement of elements. Sitting on a four-foot-tall marble pedestal is a small golden bowl filled with silver flames. Near it is a closed, wire-mesh cage on its own platform. There are three levers outside the cage. The cage has three separate divisions, each

with its own basin, each basin filled with a different substance. A blue basin holds water, a yellow one holds dark sand, and the last is a silver basin with golden flames.

To be methodical, I try the inner doors; but as I expect, they don't budge. Clearly, I'll have to solve the puzzle to get further inside the cathedral. Good. Monsters have never attacked me whenever a logic problem has arisen. And I desperately need a respite.

I will my floating weapon to vanish and it obeys. But as I examine the apparatus, I worry. The puzzles have gotten increasingly harder and this one seems unsolvable.

The goal is obviously to quench the flames in the golden basin. Assuming this challenge follows the usual rules, one of the three other substances should do the trick. But there are trapdoors underneath the caged basins. Each lever is cleverly wired to open one third of the cage, and at the same time, to open the trapdoors in the other two sections. I will have exactly one chance to guess which substance is a silver-fire extinguisher.

Not easy. Water or sand would work with a normal fire, but these flames aren't normal. They look like animated incandescent plumes of liquid mercury, slightly translucent near the tips. Magic flames. Perhaps golden flames cancel silver ones, perhaps not. Why should silver and gold be considered opposites? I can't afford a mistake.

I am uncomfortable. I abhor being close to any kind of fire....

* * * *

Carla Carroll and Troy Dane

"I met," Troy said hesitantly, "your latest protege last night."

Carla raised her hands apologetically. "I know. Doctor Williams left a note on her watch-chart about it. It's really my fault, Troy. She's such a quick study that I probably covered too much material too fast and left out some important details. I'll try to fill in some gaps when she shows up for her afternoon shift."

"But she does know what to look for and how to handle the equipment?"

"Do you imagine," Carla growled, "I would have let her take a watch by herself if I wasn't convinced she was ready?"

Troy didn't move but somehow he seemed to take a step backwards.

"Absolutely not! I didn't mean to imply any such thing!"

"Glad to hear it."

"Uh, how is she working out ... generally? She isn't exactly your average doctor."

Carla studied Troy's face. It was as earnest, damp, and big as usual but she'd learned long ago that her department head had hidden depths, or perhaps hidden pockets was more apt. "Are you really asking, or did you notice something specific you wanted to bring to my attention?"

"Just asking. Well, mostly asking. She does seem just a little, um..."

"Defensive?"

"Something like that."

"Christ, Troy! The woman has a chip on her shoulder you could burn in your fireplace all night long. Price of fame, I imagine. But I'm really too busy to fret about it."

"It won't interfere with her work?"

"Why should it?" A low-oxygen warning chime sounded and Carla glanced toward the tank then casually made an adjustment on the zeolite adsorption regulator. "Do you ever wonder, Troy?"

"Wonder about what?"

"What he's going through in there?"

"No more than a thousand times a day. He told me, before the accident, that everyone subjected to the stimulation would have a different experience. He tried out that part of the system himself. Outside the tank, of course."

"Did he ever describe his experience?"

"He dreamt that he was playing a computer game he was obsessed with when he was a kid. But under stimulation, he'd believe the adventure was real."

He made it sound like fun. But sometimes when I'm here, I feel like I'm watching someone who can't wake up who's having the ... worst nightmare of all time.

* * * *

Paul

No matter how hard I try, I cannot find a logical solution to the puzzle. The solution only dawns on me when I ask myself a nasty question: what will I do if there is no solution? My only option will be to choose one of the three substances at random and take my chances. That thought brings me to the next. In order to use any of the substances, I'll need to move it over to the silver flames. This implies that I'll be able to pick it up! In this world, I've rarely had the power to carry physical objects.

But I must have that power now. Therefore, I can turn the problem on its head.

Reluctantly, I move closer to the golden bowl and imagine myself lifting it off its pedestal. I cannot feel my arms, but the bowl rises smoothly into the air and stays with me as I approach the cage. I am very uneasy. I reach the cage and imagine the bowl tilting. It tilts, pouring a single drop of quicksilver flame into the water-filled basin. The drop sinks like a lead pellet, burning fiercely and unquenchably at the deepest part of the basin. The next drop goes into the black sand and lies there, still burning.

I don't bother experimenting with the golden flames, but hastily upend the entire bowl of silver fire over them. The bowl vanishes and the result surprises me. Neither fire is extinguished. Instead, the flames combine, becoming something greater and brighter than mere silver and gold. Call me an unintentional alchemist! What I have made was once called "electrum": gold and silver in perfect balance. The door to the inner part of the cathedral gapes wide and the eerie music becomes frighteningly loud. It seems I am doomed to encounter the subwoofer choir after all. But I am also vastly relieved. I was afraid the two beads of pure silver fire still burning might be enough to keep me trapped.

When I call forth a weapon and step cautiously through the door, I am awestruck by the sheer size and majesty of the astonishing being who awaits me in the heart of the cathedral.

* * * *

Dana Huang and Sue Williams

"I see you've been with us for a month now," Dana remarked mildly, her eyes trained on some notes she'd taken during a recent meeting with Carla Carroll. Dana was privately amused at her own strong impulse to ask Sue Williams for her autograph.

"Only a month?" Sue thought for a second and shook her head ruefully. "You're right. I started on the nineteenth so it's been exactly a month."

"Doctor Carroll tells me you're doing extraordinarily well, that you have a real knack for anticipating your patient's needs."

"I'm glad Doctor Carroll approves, but having only one patient simplifies things."

"Is that all there is to it?"

Sue's eyes narrowed. "Perhaps not. The job seems to keep getting easier every day. In a way, I identify with him."

That last remark was a waving red flag, but Dana carefully kept her expression neutral. "I bet you're wondering why I called you in."

"Clearly, you're an excellent psychologist, Ms Huang." Sue was smiling faintly now.

Without lifting her head, gazing over the rims of her reading glasses, Dana studied the doctor with what appeared to be friendly interest. "I try my best. Our interview today is just routine hospital policy. We like to check with our staff now and then and see if there's any way we can make your lives easier." This was a quarter-truth at best. New employees were usually interviewed after six months, and then annually. But Troy Dane had expressed

concerns. And Doctor Suzanne Blake Williams was a most unusual employee....

"You want to improve my life?" Sue's smile was more pronounced. "Then I'd like to order shorter working hours and more holidays."

The renowned smile was infectious and Dana caught it. "We'll get right on that. Meanwhile," she kept her voice light and unconcerned, "what did you mean about identifying with your patient?"

"Well, it's just that he's so ... isolated."

"Because he's inside a tank?"

"That, too. But what I meant was that he's become so different from everyone else."

Dana leaned forward and her eyes sparkled with interest. "Physically different?"

"Partly. He's so ... on display. And even if the new techniques -- and isn't it incredible that he's part of the team who developed them? -- even if they work as well as we all hope, he'll never really look quite right."

"He won't?" Suddenly the emotional problems of this rich and beautiful woman sitting in front of Dana seemed trivial. "Why not?"

"We can only speed up the replacement growth so much."

"Oh. Oh my! I suppose I knew that, but I hadn't looked at the implications. So, at best, for the next few years he'll be a middle-aged man with -- "

"The fingers, toes, ears, and nose of a six-year-old. Among other disparities."

Dana took off her glasses, folded them, and laid them carefully on her desk. "But the new parts will keep aging at an accelerated rate and eventually catch up?"

"If only! Once he leaves the tank, all his ... parts will age normally."

"Can't he simply stay in the tank longer, then?"

"I'm afraid not. Electro-stimulation provides the only exercise he's been getting for almost two months. He's got to have weight-bearing exercise soon or his bones will decalcify, perhaps irreversibly. And once he leaves the tank, that's that. It won't do any good to return. His cells will have stabilized and our targeting medicines won't be able to distinguish between old growth and new growth."

"Goodness."

"The system wasn't intended primarily for adult patients. But maybe I'm making his situation sound worse than it is. In ten years or so, he'll be proportionate again. But he'll always look like something Frankenstein put together in his spare time."

"How unfortunate!"

"I agree, but it beats the alternative."

* * * *

Paul

Without my command, my rocket-launcher vanishes as I approach the titanic female figure. Just as well. I've encountered giants in this world on occasion; each time my best weapons were pitifully ineffective and I only survived by fleeing. This being is at least sixty feet tall, which makes the previous giants seem comparatively small and frail. I will run like hell if she attacks although I see no place to run to. But I am not afraid, no more than usual. My heart tells me that she will not prove hostile.

How did she get into this part of the cathedral? I see no door other than the small one I passed through. Perhaps she squeezed in through the broken roof. The sound I thought was a harmonium is apparently air whistling through gaps in her teeth. The bass choir is just her, singing. Not Gregorian chanting after all, but childish rhymes. The wheels on the bus go round and round.... The fundamental frequency of her voice must be so fantastically deep that what I'm hearing are a series of harmonics, still mostly in the low-bass range.

But the strangest part is that this titan among giants is somehow

familiar. If you ignore scale, she is shaped like a little girl. And her enormous face is terribly young. She looks no older than seven or eight. It seems to me I've seen that face before, wearing a very different expression. I don't know why, but I feel sad. The memory is no more precise and graspable than a distant nebula....

She sees me, smiles, and hunkers down to place her hand, palm up, on the polished marble cathedral floor. I obey the implied command, climbing up and standing on her open palm. She stands straight, effortlessly lifting me forty feet off the ground. She looks down upon me, still smiling, but a single tear falls from a watermelon-size eye and bathes me in a salty shower.

I am renewed! Weeks of exhaustion and fear are washed away! For one disorienting moment, I feel the textures of a computer controller -- an old-fashioned trackball -- under my right hand, my thumb resting on the smooth wheel. Then the trackball softens, evaporates, and I can see my arms.

They've evolved since I last glimpsed them. They are still horribly mutilated, but the skin is pink and hale. What were once melted stubs are now midget fingers, three on one hand and two on the other, keeping the full-sized ones company. I can wiggle the entire ten-piece collection. I stare at the glossy yellow tubes, catheters, and sensors attached to my arms and feel an unaccountable burst of pride. It's working! But then the vision fades along with pride.

Suddenly, I realize that the goddess -- what else could she be? -- is addressing me! It's hard to understand her because she sounds like dozens of deep, strange voices speaking an unearthly tongue. My ear adjusts. I am hearing ordinary English, spoken with a childish lisp. But there is nothing childish about what the goddess is saying.

"Can you comprehend me now, Paul?"

"Yes." My own voice sounds absurdly high and squeaky.

"Then I offer you congratulations. You are now approaching the final levels."

"Final levels?"

"These are the conscious levels and if you wish to attain them you can only do so consciously."

Abruptly, I am deeply fearful, I don't know why. "What do you mean?"

She moves her face closer to mine and I realize with an unpleasant shock that her forehead has a skin-graft tautness. "You have decisions to make."

I have to swallow twice before I can get my voice to work. "What decisions?"

Her left eye -- huge, clear, and innocent -- becomes liquid with another goddess-sized tear. But this time as the tear falls, it falls as a flat sheet rather than a drop and freezes in midair. It lengthens, becoming progressively more reflective as it expands, until I am facing a perfect rectangular mirror. I can see the cathedral behind me. Thin colored beams of light are streaming through the open roof, poking crepuscular holes in the mist, spotlighting mysterious icons and altars to unrecognizable deities. But, vampire-like, my body isn't visible.

"I offer you," she says in her many voices, "the middle past."

A tall lanky man with indifferent posture appears slowly in the mirror like a developing photograph. His head is crowned with an unruly thatch of black hair, silvering at the temples; a gold-plated stethoscope hangs from his neck.

"Do you recognize this man?"

In a way I do. I recognize the face, but what I'm seeing is an upsetting and unfamiliar version of me, a civilian version. I have had glimpses of myself recently, in night-dark ponds and crystal windows, and those glimpses revealed a potent warrior, massive yet sleek, sheathed in bronze muscle and burnished armor. This man is puny and pale. He looks like a person who has lived his life resting in a velvet box. And he has no weapons ... although I suppose the stethoscope might be used as a bludgeon in an

emergency....

"Surely, this isn't supposed to be me?" I ask, angrily.

"This is as you were in the middle past." The great voices sound oddly sympathetic. Now, I offer you the recent past."

The figure fades and what replaces it is so hideous that I turn away from the sight, fall to my knees on the goddess's rock-steady palm, and can do no more than simply breathe for a few minutes.

But the image has imprinted itself -- I almost dare the word "burned" -- into my memory. I see it with my eyes closed.

"I am sorry, but this you must face." The goddess speaks gently.

"I can't." Despite my denial, I'm already struggling to my feet and opening my eyes.

The unfortunate person in the mirror has been half-melted in some dreadful blaze. I cannot tell if it's a man or a woman. Many fingers and toes are gone along with the hair, ears, nose, genitals, and considerable skin. One eye is a scorched socket. The skin that remains is either charcoal-black or has the white blistering of third-degree burns. I know from bitter experience that this victim will not live for long. Unless...

"This isn't me again, is it?" I am shamed; no warrior should use such a fragile voice. Besides, I already know the answer.

"It was you. Now, I offer you the near future. Do you have the courage to see it?"

* * * *

Sue Williams and Carla Carroll

A brass sign on the door was lettered "Dr. Paul R. Levine."

"I'm not comfortable about this," complained Carla, placing a key in the lock and twisting it a bit harder than necessary. "But Dana Huang approved your little expedition."

Sue frowned at Carla's back as she followed the older woman through the doorway. "I'm not planning to snoop through his belongings, if that's your concern. I'm just hoping that by spending a few minutes in his office I'll get a better feeling for who the man is. Besides, this is partly your doing."

Carla flipped a light switch and whirled around. "My doing?"

"In a sense. You're the one who assigned me to keep working with Doctor Levine, even after he leaves the tank. And you're the one who told me that his office was more ... personal than most."

"I suppose," said Carla slowly, "you have a point. At any rate, here we are. And I've very little spare time today, so I'd appreciate it if you could get this done quickly. If you've got questions, I'll try to answer them."

A tall window provided an attractive view of the verdant Marin hills along with a slice of the Golden Gate. Ten separate piles of paper were lined up on a large oak desk, trapped neatly beneath ten fumed-glass paperweights. One desk corner was dedicated to a grouping of color photographs in silver or wooden frames. Sue went behind the desk, sat down self-consciously in an Aeron chair a size too large for her and studied the pictures. Despite the hospital's air-cleaning system, there was a film of dust on exposed surfaces, which seemed thicker atop the picture frames. "I wonder if these are his parents or his grandparents?" she asked, pointing to a photo because she was reluctant to disturb the arrangement.

Carla walked around the desk to see. "Parents. Clay and Deborah Levine. Both deceased. Paul told me that Deborah was forty-eight when he was born."

"And this must be a brother?"

"Daniel, his only sibling. Five years older. Dan's a corporate lawyer who works for some insurance company in Connecticut. He's been here twice since the accident. You'll meet him before long, I'm sure."

Sue leaned forward to get a closer look at a picture in a particularly thick wooden frame. "Who's the little girl? She doesn't seem to resemble anyone else in the family."

"Mary Kandziolka," Carla's gruff voice had turned soft. "Not a relative. Twenty years ago, Mary was one of Paul's first patients during his

residency in Burns and Trauma at San Francisco General. She changed his life. That picture was taken on her sixth birthday. A week later, she nearly died in a house-fire. I don't think Paul would mind if I..."

Carla lifted the frame, undid a small catch, and the frame opened to reveal a hollow space within, filled with more pictures. She carefully removed them and spread them out on the desk.

The first ones were hard to look at. The girl was unrecognizable, scorched from head to waist. Next, she appeared heavily bandaged. Subsequent photos showed her progressing through a long series of skin grafts and rebuilding operations, a painful process that must have taken years. The final picture was of a young woman, somewhere in her middle teens, who appeared almost undamaged ... unless you looked closely.

"How did Mary Kandziolka change his life?"

"Paul was her primary physician through her entire process of reconstruction and rehabilitation." Carla signed. "He became personally invested. Eventually, he couldn't stand the thought of any more children going through what she went through. As you know, we've made great strides in cosmetic surgery over the last two decades, but -- "

"It isn't nearly enough."

The dour lines of Carla's face eased as she regarded the younger woman. She nodded approvingly and walked over to a ladder of steel shelving near the window, reached up to a high shelf, and pulled down a clipboard holding a sheaf of papers.

"You might find this particularly interesting, Doctor," she said, handing over the clipboard.

Sue stared at the topmost sheet. Rectangular boxes labeled with either a "P" or an "S" were scattered thickly over the page, connected with ruler-straight pencil lines. Inside each box, in lettering so tiny it would have been illegible if it weren't so precise, was a short paragraph.

Sue almost immediately realized that "P" stood for "problem," and "S" for solution. Most solution boxes had new lines running to possible problems generated by the solution, and those problems, in turn, ran to their own possible solutions. Some solution boxes, such as one labeled "Nogo 66," contained a question mark.

"It's all here, isn't it?" said Sue, almost reverentially. She unclipped the papers and riffled through them. More boxes. Eyes still focused on the diagrams, she left the chair, walked around the desk to where there was enough room on the carpet, knelt down, and began arranging papers. Carla said nothing and merely watched.

It was a big mosaic; each paper was a tile and lines stretching from paper to paper made the positioning clear. Fully assembled, the chart was a paean to organization.

Sue traced some of the major patterns with a finger.

Problem -- scar tissue forming too rapidly, inhibiting new growth. Solution -- debriding. Problem -- pain and inefficiency. Solution -- tissue softening and scar inhibiting agents. Problem -- applying softening agents uniformly and continually...

Problem -- lung damage from heat and smoke inhalation. Solution -- liquid ventilation (perfluorooctyl bromide), (note: 0.2 micron emulsion small enough to force capillaries open). Problem -- unsafe for long-term use (?) Problem -- maintaining oxygen level, removing CO2 buildup...

Problem -- damaged soft tissue and nerves. Solution -- inhibiting scar-tissue based anti-regenerators such as proteoglycan, creating new tissue scaffolding (fibrin matrices? hydrogel?), encouraging cell adhesion (Nogo-66? Steroids such as oxandrolone? Salasodine?) Problem -- creating and aligning new tissue scaffolds...

Much of the chart was highly technical but the array of lines eventually led to one modest box on the last paper, which held a brief description of Unit Seventeen, referred to as a "healing tank." What was so impressive to Sue was how thoroughly integrated this final solution was. Every

aspect of the system, from its perfluorochemical emulsion to the magnetic fields generated in the tank's supporting platform, did double or even triple duty. Dr. Levine apparently had a talent for engineering. Only one "problem" rectangle was attached to that penultimate box, and the rectangle held only one word: "funds." The chart was dated July 5, 2018.

"He had it all worked out six years ago," Sue said quietly. "Please tell me more about his accident."

Carla was looking out the window wistfully. "If we can get going, we can talk on the way."

"Of course," said the younger woman, gathering up the papers. "Thank you for giving me so much of your time. I've learned a lot here."

Carla waited until they had left the room and were halfway down the corridor before she said, "It happened on Nob Hill. Just blind bad luck, I suppose. For Paul, it was a matter of being in the wrong place at the worst possible time."

"He hit a truck?"

"Other way around. He was headed downhill on Powell when some idiot bicyclist swerved in front of him and he had to slam on his brakes. The police think the truck behind him was tailgating, but the driver claimed he couldn't stop in time because the street was too steep. The skid marks were 'inconclusive' and Powell is awfully steep near the top." Carla scowled. "Such is the fabric of lawsuits. But the results were indisputable. The truck rear-ended Paul's fancy sport's car and the car's methane tank ruptured and exploded."

"It's amazing he survived."

"If the paramedics hadn't gotten there so fast, he wouldn't have. Even so, he would have certainly died within an hour if Unit Seventeen hadn't already been set up, ready for its first test with a human volunteer."

"Incredibly bad luck and then incredibly good luck."

"That's life," said Carla.

"The inventor becomes the first subject for his invention. That's how they'd script it on TV."

Carla shrugged. "Sometimes, cliches happen."

* * * *

The image in the mirror re-forms. It has two good eyes. The black hair has returned, this time with no hint of gray. The body is naked. Its skin is pink, healthy, and whole without any telltale scarring or seaming from skin grafts. But the restored features are bizarre, anachronistic. The nose is a stub and the ears absurdly small. Most of the fingers and toes, along with the penis and scrotum, match the size and apparent youth of the nose and ears.

Nevertheless, I recognize myself. The miniature features make my head seem swollen, grotesque. I look like a juvenile conception of a Martian. The effect is chilling. Unacceptable.

"Now that you have seen the near future," the goddess says, "are you willing to live it?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Always. Either you accept what life offers with a whole heart or you struggle futilely against it."

"What difference does it make?" I sounded as bitter as cyanide.

"All the difference between being asleep and being awake."

The statement seems nonsensical at first, a complete non sequitur. Then it hits me. She is talking about living in the world as it is rather than as I wish it was. An electric shock of insight galvanizes my soul. I feel like a sock that has suddenly been turned inside out...

What kind of problem is it to look like a freak compared to being that half-incinerated hulk I'd seen in the mirror a minute ago? When had I developed so much vanity connected with my appearance?

I smile because all my silliness has been exposed, and the humbling fresh air is an unexpected relief. What a fool I am! All my life I've been coddled, insulated from difficulties. Coddled by a well-to-do family, high

social standing, connections that made it easy to get into medical school, coddled by the twin accidents of being smart and reasonably good looking. God, in so many ways I'd had it so easy! And now, for the first time, I lose my immunity to personal unpleasantness and stand face to face with my own unconscious arrogance, an arrogance born and nurtured by privilege.

And I know where I am now; at least I think I do. I am asleep in my own healing tank! Was I burned in a fire? I don't remember, but I must have been. Therefore, all this is only a dream. But it is my dream and here I have become both teacher and student.

"Welcome to the final levels," the goddess says quietly in her multiple voices. She kneels quickly and I jump off her hand to the floor. She stands again but she shrinks while I grow. For an instant, we are exactly the same height and gaze directly into each other's eyes. Now she is child-sized while I am a giant. She is becoming transparent along with the cathedral itself. She waves and vanishes.

I am floating in a vast empty ocean. I think I am alone, so I am startled when I hear her voice again -- sweetly and appropriately pitched for a girl of eight -- coming from the center of my chest.

"In many ways, you are immersed in your own salvation, Paul. But how many others can you save?"

This time, I understand her immediately. The problem I'd been attempting to address, suffering and disfigurement from severe burns, is far more common than most people realize. But my solution had been shaped partly by my long-standing separation from life's realities. I'd set up an absurdly exclusive health spa. Unit Seventeen was effective, that much was obvious, but the system was fantastically expensive, care-intensive, and limited to one person at a time. I'd been so focused on building the perfect regeneration tank that I hadn't even considered how impractical it would be to set up similar systems in other hospitals!

I could do better, much better, and I would. For starters, it should be possible to build tanks that could hold four or five patients at once...

Something has changed. That sense of foreboding, which has been with me for so long, is gone. Am I awake? I can see the tank around me! The walls show my own reflection, but the lighting is such that I can look past it and through the glass. There are three people in the room outside my tank. I know two, Carla Carroll and Troy Dane. But when I see the third, I decide that I am not completely awake yet, but standing in that damp sand between the ocean of dreams and the dry beach of conscious awareness. I recognize Suzanne Blake Williams even through her face seems more mature than it looks on all those TV shows of hers still in syndication.

Then I remember, years ago, watching an interview with Sue Williams when she shocked the entertainment world by announcing she was quitting show business. She was tired of "living on good looks" and wanted to do something worthwhile with the balance of her life. She claimed she intended to become a doctor, but the interviewer didn't seem to take her seriously.

So, it really could be Suzanne Blake Williams out there, but I doubt it. If she is only a dream-figment, my message to myself is banal but damn important: looks aren't everything.

Troy is pressed close to the side of the tank, holding a microphone. "How are you feeling, Paul? We'll be pulling you out of there after we run some final tests." His words resonate around me like bubbles of meaning.

Dream or not, I give a thumbs-up gesture and try to say, "the operation was a complete success, and the doctor lived!" My voice is a weird, deep buzz but it couldn't penetrate the tank in any case. Sue Williams is grinning. Perhaps dream-actresses can read lips.

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