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Ex Muro

by Dana William Paxson

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Author’s Note: “What happens to the mind of a serial killer after that mind has been in prison for ten thousand years? Jono is one possible answer, but at first he repelled me. The first few pages of this story sat untouched for several years, and then I learned to hear the rest of Jono’s dreadful thoughts and moves. His tale is removed from our world by light-years and millennia, but its street children are near-kin to the technosavages of war-torn countries we know all too well. As I wrote down Jono’s words, I began to wonder: Is he lying to me? Just how far from us is he, really?”

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ELECTRIC DAWN APPROACHES. I stretch my arm out before me into the corridor dark, luxuriating. The skin of my upper arm tightens and thins out where it becomes one with the wall in which I am embedded. It tightens and thins, but it refuses to break. Damn its strength!

Every so often in the slow-walking years I tried to rip it, tear myself free with these long heavy fingernails, and walk out into this darkness like those people who

pass by me once in a long time. Jono is my name, the name I forgot for too long. Jono, who took so many men and women and hollowed out their skins and stuffed them lifelike and put them back in their places in life to be found making little endless movements and shedding endless tears.

Twelve thousand years imprisoned here, and no one remembers me, except to descend two or three hundred levels in this ageless underground City, to laugh and point and wonder at the man locked in the stone wall.

I will make them all remember me again.

I thrust my neck and jaw forward, straining against the bond between my toughened skin and the stone wall around me. This time I will stay uncaught, and I will take many human insides and make of them a single flesh creature, tubes and bags and vessels and cords and muscles and bones and nerves, a great heaving sentient thing to be left in the fountain at Aswal Narr. A living, sobbing memorial to my long power and skill as a maker. My ancient vats are waiting.

I count the days in this underground world by the brightening and dimming of the corridor ceiling lights, synthetic memories of the sun seven hundred levels above this empty street. The last passer-by here, maybe ten years ago, an andro woman laughing and drunk with hallucins, left a shard of cryssteel on the floor. Since then, four thousand synthetic dawns have passed in this dusty stone hallway, and each day I reached for that tiny shard and came just short. Until today.

The wall section that holds me is a miracle of elastic steel: a membrane of such flexibility that I can actually step outward into the street and dance little steps, bending down to touch the stone streetfloor, straining against the wall's pull. It is also a prison so secure that in twelve thousand years I have been unable to tear free. Even my diamond-alloy nails, harder than anything but cryssteel itself, are blunted and flawed from ripping at the membrane.

Now, thanks to the leaping kick of a tiny streetmouse, the cryssteel shard bounced into my reach. I have withheld from myself an exquisite pleasure: to cradle this ultrasharp sliver of transparent metal in my fingers, plunge it into my membrane in just the right places, feel the pain of escape when I slice through and rip myself free.

The woman had worn the shard at her wrist, maybe to use as a defense, maybe just because she liked the sparkle and gleam of its irregular facets, maybe to scar her lover. Now it lies in the darkness just within my span. I exult for a while, thanking her and the little rodent for their assistance.

She is probably dead now, gone into the recycling vats with her short-lived andro genes, to be reborn out of elements into a new street woman for the wealthy to toy with. And the rodent, caught maybe by some predator itself now dead and recycled in the City's hungry engines, lives on in its elements, a part of the new woman.

The thought amuses me. I laugh. Andro servants have their own little heaven in their heads, a kind of biological cyberspace; they don't care what humans do to them. Andros can fantasize themselves out of the city to any planet or setting they can imagine.

I would have indeed enjoyed something like that to help me pass a few thousand years. The lights begin to glow a little. Dawn. I crouch and reach forward one more time. My fingers close on the shard. Yes—it is as sharp as I had thought. I prick the metal-strong skin at my left shoulder, and my bronze blood wells and trickles down my chest. No more will I be this living relief-sculpture, gray and trapped like the wall of stone around me. My limbs throb.

I want to change my point of view, turn my gaze left and right along the street. I make the first exquisite cut around my head, where the skin leaves the vicinity of my skull to become part of the wall. The crysteel sings pain to me as I outline my neck and head, sawing through my dermal prison.

Air rushes in, burning into the uncovered flesh behind the wall's barrier. Screaming, I flay myself. Any of my own original skin is now long gone, absorbed by the preservation drugs they gave me, the gene drugs that made me able to feed only and forever on the photons of the hallway light. For a time, I will bathe in pure pain: an incentive to find a skin to replace the gift prison-hide that has so long armored me in here.

My screams continue; no one is near enough at this hour to hear me. I saw quickly through the last confining sheets of the flexible metal at my feet; I step free, and fall on my face. My legs barely work. To learn to use them again will take some time.

The dawn lights become an underground sunrise. No one will come this way for hours. I twist in crawling pain to see my calf and buttock muscles, no skin covering them now. Slowly, carefully, I pull the prison-skin from my front. My exposed flesh—chest, face, neck, thighs, sex—burns now as if I have been set aflame. On the dusty stone floor fall dribbles of golden fluid: my eternal blood, another gift of the City's minions. No hemoglobin needed for a wall-prisoner.

The pain lashes me to full attention, to fight my way to my feet, stagger back and forth, and school my muscles. Now, needing real blood again, I am thirsty. I know the old ways, the spiral stairs of the City's filthy airshafts; I stumble off to the left, toward a steel door in the wall of this corridor. It should be Shaft Arbonel. That shaft will take me to my walled-off home, ages after I closed the last crevices, knowing then that they would find me.

Yes, say the door's faint dead runes, Arbonel. The door, rusted shut, gives way when I slam it with a hand, flies back, and bounces from the wall; its squeal mocks my hand's explosion of nerve lightning. The stink of the shaft boils out to me. I open my arms to the stench and stagger forward. Here in the shaft, darkness

rules again, except for a pinpoint of light thousands of feet above me. That point is the sun of planetary morning. Sharp-toothed rats, interested in my scent, follow me now; I ascend the stair winding around the shaft, stopping to rest and breathe. No energy here. If I slip from the steps, and fail to splatter on the flights below me, I will die in the quickening slime ten thousand feet down.

Even Jono the Corer can die.

I wobble to a stop at Level 300. My ages-weakened legs shake; the bacterial film of the shaft's floor begins to scorch the soles of my feet, eat its way up my ankles and calves. It is time to feed, and heal. With bleeding fingers I pull the rusted door at this level; it squawks. I wait until the sounds of voices fade, and then look in from behind the door. This was a thriving Zone when I walked its streets. It still is.

Women parade their wealth, men their strength, children their fantasies, all in tight and shining costumes, with monstrous gene-crafted reptilian pets coiling their arms and necks. The pets smile and gabble with flicking tongues, the people frown and posture at one another. In twelve thousand years, even after the Destruction and the Colonization, so little has changed; then, only the pets were otherwise, crooning in polytonal voices and oozing sweet drugs from their skins.

But the people who walk past my prison in this age seem strangely plain, uniform. In the days when the Mondracen immured me for my crimes, human bodies flourished in mad variety: the Snin, spidery and six-armed, bone-slab faces pointed at cheeks and chin; the Crasstilizi, shag-haired and clumsy, cawing their poems and stroking their shambling young with pancake fingertips; the Treeminar, miniatures the size of mice scuttling the corridors on motorized hovers, shrieking cries at each other and at the large humans treading too near them; the Shoomtar Jend, great flat eyes the heaviest masses of their sleek, floating, gas-filled bodies, their gray skin-membranes marbled with their family colors; and finally the Mondracen, the dully-normal humans in the body plan I see here now. None survived the Great Death.

The City itself died then. I hung in the wall for so long after the Great Death that I nearly lost all track of time. Then the human Colonists came, the very image of the Mondracen, and they lighted the City, and they found me. I spoke to them, and they ran, but then they slowly brought machines, and they proclaimed me an ancient work of art, and left me here to perform for them.

And so I shall now perform what they did not expect.

This dawn, many revelers return home. A man approaches, alone, and passes; I twist his neck and drag him into the shaft stairway landing-space, shutting the door. In the dimness, his eyes bug with terror. I have severed his spinal nerves. He lives long enough to feel his clothing and then his skin pulled free.

I feed on him. My so-long-useless digestive system awakens and complains, then settles to its ancient task. As plain honest blood returns to my body, strength

comes quickly. When I am done with nourishment, I step carefully into his flayed skin and work my feet and hands down to the ends. I ram my fingernails out underneath his. The skin is a little loose—he was somewhat overweight—but it will do until I reach my maze of rooms, behind the false wall not far from here. I pull the face over my own, clasp the skin at the back where I had split it, adjusting the eyelids and brows and lips.

My pain abates a little. I dress myself in his suit of clothing, not so tight on me. The suit and the skullcap he wore now serve to hold his skin in place. I hurl what is left of his body down Shaft Arbonel, to dissolve in the City's bottom slime.

The skin smells sweet and overripe. I emerge from the shaft entrance and walk slowly through an underground morning. The revelers are gone now, and only a few tradespeople and cleaners pass me, their eyes averted. I recover an easy gait, practice a strut, the skin shifting slightly if I move too quickly. I pat the nose back into place, and hitch uncomfortably at my scrotum frying in the host-skin's antibodies.

A woman with a lush body laughs at me, says something in a musical tongue I do not understand. I raise my chin haughtily and walk on. She reminds me of damned Alayre, now long ages dead.

In a narrow side way, I find the pseudostone wall I had made. Will it still open under my hands, or in these twelve thousand years has someone broken it, gotten in, collapsed my rooms? No one is nearby. I place my hands on the wall in the two slight depressions I had left, and push eight times in the rhythm of the words in Taranese: *Always I find my way back home.*

Watching for prying eyes, I wait, counting. The mechanism waits too, and then I put my left hand in its depression and hold it steady there, pressing hard for sixty heartbeats. A rumble, and the wall shakes, moves to the right, and stops, leaving a gap of darkness just wide enough for me to squeeze through.

I fumble inside, find the closure mechanism and use it, and trigger the long-stored emergency lights. A chemical glow from a foot-wide circular patch in the ceiling fills the room I am in, my study and resting-space, with dim green radiance.

Millennial dust coats my hideaway everywhere, beetle trails stitching it with hungry errands. Steel shelves stuffed with permtxts of all sizes and shapes line the bedrock walls. A couch the size of a bed for two sits facing a long low table near the middle of the square room. Two doorways mark opposite corners of the room; next to the one which leads into my lab, I pry open a box on the wall and hesitantly punch three engraved steel buttons.

A brief whir, and air moves again, and soft white light replaces the green. The aged and hidden links to buried magma powershafts work even now: another miracle for the condemned. My adopted skin smarting and itching, I go to work.

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There. So much better: a tuck here, several darts there, a bath of immunoharmonizers and adhesors, and the skin is mine. The mirrors show me a thin man, his eyes jealous and deep-set with the hunger for life, his muscles wasted to strings from his long immuration, his powerful fingernails hooking out through his new, naked wrapping. I pat my new head of tousled black hair and grin, all iridescent teeth, long thin lips. Handsome demon.

Always I find my way back home. What will they do when they find the burst-open wall, the missing living statue that once entertained them? By now the craft of minshillindar has been forgotten, that ancient trick of prison bioengineering that embedded me in that wall for all time.

All time has ended. I am in the apocalyptic now.

I *am* the apocalyptic now.

Once I was one of the Mondracen myself, an ordinary son of exceptionally-gifted parents. Too ordinary for them, I was; they fed me the favored neurotransforms of the wealthy, to amplify my gifts to meet their expectations, hoping for a son who would ascend to City rule. But one gift, well hidden in me, became amplified far beyond all the others: the gift of cruelty. When I learned the deep art of genetic fabrication, I became what they called a monster.

A sound from the entryway makes me stop moving. I had closed the wall behind me; perhaps one of the nimble rats has followed me home. Concealed by the lab door, I wait.

A small human figure, wearing cloth tatters of a coverall woven with spangles of colored metal, moves in total silence, stealthy, toward my couch.

Maybe it would offer me nourishment, maybe its genes could have news for mine. I would merely need to store it in my vats, unwind the skeined knowledge from its cells, and mate its new chemistry to my ancient version.

Its head is large, covered with plastered slabs of black straight hair. A child. How did it get in? It stops at the table; its bony fingers trail through the dust. It freezes in place. Its hand darts out, seizes a beetle, brings the struggling blue-black creature to its teeth. Three bites, and the beetle is gone, a wiry hind leg kicking one last futile time as it passes the child's lips.

Something unfamiliar kindles in me, a sense of kinship with this small hunter. Has my imprisonment softened my temperament? I blink twice, and the child's eyes are on me.

There is no time to lose. I spring, my hands and nails out, ready to grab and subdue. The little creature vanishes like a dream, and I crouch groping in the shadows. This is unexpected. I'm not as fast as I thought, or else this little one is faster than so many I've seen.

It must be one of the street waifs of this gloriously ugly era. From my long wall station I have seen packs of these children take down fully-armed squads of soldiers and strip them to their bones, in minutes. Many died, caught in the beams and scything metal of the guns, but their survivors feasted on the gunners' remains. Now I face one of them. There may be others.

I have no food to offer it. "Where are you?" I ask in Taranese. Useless, of course; Taranese, Wendridgian, Farhossch, Meiyandao, all gone with the Great Death eleven thousand years ago. The people since the Colonization speak dialects of Share, the Colonist tongue distorted over centuries by their tribalisms and wars. These children of the understreets rarely speak at all.

A trinket! In a high cabinet, I find a chain of cerametal jewels, translucent and pearly, set in osmium scribed and inlaid with ruby and sapphire glazes. "For you," I say in Share, dangling it on a long fingernail, pointing in the direction I thought the little one went.

Nothing happens, of course. I lay the jewelry on my low table and turn to leave the room. A brief scuttle; I whirl, and the jewel chain is gone. A soft click from the entranceway, and I leap to find it closed.

I had thought these people a devolution of those from before the Great Death, but this speed impresses me. Perhaps these children are breeding into a new and ghastly race of predators like me.

Weariness rises around me like dark water. My limbs ache. It is time to begin the regenerative process, but I lack bodily energy to assemble the vats and tanks, and acquire the necessary fluids. I must rest, but the door troubles me: how will I prevent the child from returning and killing me in my sleep?

There is a way. In the entranceway I find the two great slabs of steel I set aside as bars, for some final confrontation cornered here. I draw them painfully up to the slots flanking the door, and fit them in, then I turn to the couch. For the first time in twelve thousand years, it is time for bed.

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A dream: I am discovered and bound and walled in once more, and this time it is the children who make me prisoner, and I am their size, and weak. I protest, fighting to escape the membrane, and they laugh, stuff stones in my mouth, and leave.

Dead sweet devil Alayre comes to me then, trailing her floating veils like pale-orange smoke, her breasts articulating themselves with the muscles of her kind, reaching out to tickle my chest with pointed nipples, rounding, narrowing, bulging above; she takes the stones from my mouth, smiles and kisses me, and her sugared brain poison is on my tongue. I want her; I moan and stretch out to hold her, and she is gone.

The poison works on my dream. I lie broken and paralyzed on the understreet itself, my wall-prison ripped open. The street children gather over me with hissing voices and narrow-bladed knives. Enough, I think, and I fight my way to wakefulness.

The darkness of my room shrouds my eyes, but it is pregnant with danger. I sit upright, and scutterings make me leap to my feet. I dive for the light controls. Dozens of these children boil through the room and cluster in the laboratory entrance. I scabble for my blade, under the cushions of the couch, but a high sharp voice calls, “No!” in Share.

I turn to see a girl not yet a woman aiming a weapon at me. “Don’t hurt me,” I say.

“What are you?” she asks. Her eyes gleam, red-irised and white, pupils black needle-holes. She is thin but supple and strong. Her skin shines a rich tan.

“I am Jono,” I say. They all gather closer to me, costumed in skins and furs and leaves and skittering fabrics, their stench brawling in my nostrils, eyes cold and drilling me. A stream of urine issues from a tiny half-dressed one who is clutching one end of a steel bolt and sucking the other end.

“What is Jono?” The girl persists, her weapon steady as the stone around us.

What is Jono indeed? Does anyone know what Jono is, or was? My memory stutters, falters, refuses to reach past those dead millennia, backward in time’s dark abysm. “I am a man,” I tell her. The accents of this time begin to ride better on my lips and tongue.

“You are no man. You stole his skin. Are you Zash?” She shifts the tip of her weapon back, forth, the thickness of a fingernail.

Zash: she must mean the aliens, the Zashinhalh, in that mind-whisper of theirs. “No. I was a man in a wall. I escaped. Now I am a man.”

She places her free hand in that of a boy next to her, his eyesockets filled with dull-gray steel orbs. Her fingers ripple against his palm; he reciprocates, and turns to vanish along the entryway.

All this coming and going makes danger that I will be found. “This is a secret place. How did you find it?”

She points at a squat little boy wearing a tight set of armoring body plates made of glued-together layers of colored paper. “Furusi followed you, and told us. We will not tell anyone.”

Why don’t they just kill me? They could take this place from me as easily as they followed me. But I have this moment, and I have guile.

I wave my arm expansively at the room, and a few children duck and mutter. “Of course you can come here. My home is now your home.”

The sarcasm seems to pass unnoticed, but the girl keeps her weapon on me and her eyes lock on me, wide, and she says, “Every place we choose is our home.”

I smile, and think of ways I can change their bodies with my biologicals. They will not move so quickly then, and then I will take back what is mine.

What is this weapon she holds? It is a gun; I stare at it, and she begins to lower the muzzle of it until it points at my knees. I have won them over.

She pulls the trigger. Four beams spread from the weapon’s muzzle, and my legs are severed. I fall helpless to the floor, my precious new-made blood spurting from sectioned arteries; she approaches and stares down at me. “Nemizannah,” she calls. A tall boy comes beside her. “Fire,” she says, pointing at my stumps, and the boy named Nemizannah lugs a plasma torch from beneath his beetle-shell vestment, and he blast-cauterizes the wounds.

I do not tell of this pain, for doing so is wearying, and useless, and becomes uninteresting to the jaded, and repels the sensitive. Besides, pain, whether mine or someone else’s, is food to me, and none but another like me could fully understand that.

The bleeding stops. I try to rise onto my hands with arm strength, but the girl pushes me over sideways with her foot, and I lie staring up at her, unable to prevent vast hatred from filling my gaze. She recoils.

“Yes. Now I see what you are.”

“You can kill me.” I say this so easily, as if the thousands of years of my persistent life are nothing. To live, and hope, and then die helpless at the hands of a vicious child. My resignation surprises me.

“No.” She waves her weapon. “You may live, for now. We will watch you. If you try to hurt us, then we will kill you.”

My agony blazes through her words. “I understand. But how can I move myself around, now that you have taken my legs?”

“We will care for you.” From a sack at her side she pours out beside me a heap of dead beetles, the fat dark-blue humpbacked ones that gobble the grease of the street tuber fryers. “Here is food.” She turns to the others, flicks a gesture over her head, then reaches to my light controls and dims them to a midnight umbrance. One tall thin child in a shift of many veils takes one of my severed lower legs under each arm, my blood-tinged ichor leaving a gooey trail, and they are all gone.

Silence is now. I lie and think. A small rattle beside me; one of the beetles is still alive. I reach out and spear a nail through it.

It tastes good: fresh, meaty, with that tinge of metallics the beetles always seem to carry. Lying on my side, on the stone floor of my ancient hideaway, I dine, making a neat heap of the beetle shells.

These children have read me well. I must reach deeper within myself to escape their readings, and arrive where I can continue my little work of time.

The first thing will be the lab. From it I will make things for them, at first. Then, later, when I can exact payment for my truncated body, I will make for myself.

The dinner I have eaten drags at me. Warmth creeps from my belly out through my trunk and my limbs, embracing with pleasure even the seared and scorching stumps of my legs.

Amazing sleep. In all the time of my immuration, I never lost awareness; the ichor they poured into my veins made that a certainty. But now I have blood once more, and with blood, sleep slides warmly in. My eyes weigh shut, and I turn slowly onto my back and breathe once, twice, and then, for the second time, I dream of Alayre.

“Wake up.” Thin, tough hands rub my cheeks. The girl looks down at me. “We have something for you.”

I have slept for hours. Two boys stand on the other side of my room, a lumpy dark-red object between them. A flowchair, a rounded seat that moves slowly across uneven surfaces on a single broadfooted trunk of a leg. The leg is a slug-like living plastic the people of this era have engineered; I would have preferred a faster means of movement, but the boys seem proud of their present to me.

I smile. “Can you help me up into it?”

Six of the larger children come and loft me up and into the waiting seat. My stumps have been dressed with skinseal, and they burn only slightly through its anesthetic.

The girl comes to stand in front of me, glaring with those red-black eyes. “You will work for us,” she says. Her mouth is a lovely bud of sensuous lips, tightly pursed when she is not speaking. Her nose is barely a ridge, as if some force had pressed it back almost level with her face; her nostrils, almost slits, widen and flatten again, disconcertingly, when she is thinking. She is thinking right now. She gestures toward the lab. “You make things here. Make us the things we want, and we’ll let you live.”

“What do you want?”

“Poison.” She smiles.

“What kind of poison? What should it do? Kill people?”

“No. Make them sick. I want them to live that way. It should be something without taste or smell, that they can eat in their food.”

Now I smile. “I can do what you want.” How many times I have already done this thing, I can’t remember any more.

“Good. Start now.” She turns and walks to the entranceway, then looks back at me with a smirk. “You think I am like you, but I’m not. Remember that.”

“I will.” I urge my chair toward the lab door. “Do you have a name?”

“Mama Jones.”

Her rosebud lips, her smirk, remind me of Alayre.

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They bring me food every day. They clean me and my clothes, ignoring their own incrustations of street filth that never seem, somehow, to cling to what is mine. I create the poisons in the first two days, and give them to Mama Jones. She grins and vanishes. Now, after five days, she brings a newly-dead streetrat into my lab, and tosses it onto the central table where I am running a gene-expression synthesizer.

Streetrats are black-coated rodents with long naked prehensile tails, and claws that can find purchase in the sheer faces of rock that line the City. Over my thousands of wall-years I have watched them evolve from creatures the length of my little finger to monsters with bodies as long as my forearm. What the children of the streets leave behind, the streetrats eat.

“Is this my dinner?” I stare at Mama Jones.

She laughs. I have never heard any sound like this: a grating giggle that chokes itself off, then bursts out again, over and over. “No,” she says, finally.

“A gift?”

“No. What can you do with it?”

Again I have underestimated her. She apparently understands what my lab is for. I weigh the possibilities; maybe this is the opening to my freedom. I inspect the dead animal. “What would you like me to do with it?”

“Grow some new ones. Make them pets for us.”

Aah. This is wonderful. I try to conceal my glee, but I’m sure she notices it. “All right. This will take some time. Maybe a year.” This is too long for her, I know.

“Thirty days.” It is a statement of limitation.

“I’ll do what I can.”

“Thirty days.” She makes a sign with her hand, and three boys appear from

the front room. Another sign from her, and they all turn and leave.

I maneuver my flowchair to the lab door, and secure the door as best I can against further visits. Twenty days are window dressing. This plan of mine will take about ten days; in that time, I will have the desired pets ready, with a few important additions.

First, I will send a message out through the droppings of these pets. An intestinal bacterial resident, one I know quite well, will carry a most interesting cytomegalovirus. Cytomegaly is the merging of cells due to the breakdown of cell walls, as when the City breaks down the walls between small apartments to create a large meeting-chamber.

But my virus will bear another burden: the immunoharmonizer that was, long ago, my signature. When the virus infects someone, it will begin the selective merging of their cells and the breakdown of their musculature and bone; little by little, they will become immobile, dissolve, and begin to spread helplessly in a carpet across their stone floors, merging into each other as they meet. Thanks to other retroviral transfers, their cells will be reeducated to draw sustenance from the air and stone and water itself, even from the beetles and other creatures that scutter across them as they lie like coatings everywhere.

Only their brains and senses will remain whole, to contemplate their changes. They will become one vast coat of human paint throughout the City. As once I was, in my wall.

Of course, this will take much time, and I create clocking genes that will trigger in later viral generations to begin the transformations only after the rodents have spread everywhere. Some few people may be resistant, most likely these children, but I have saved the children for the last.

I have a special surprise for them.

My new animals will enjoy being scratched on the neck and under the ears. That is where I will put the secretory glands for demorphin, which will be clocked through a few generations before they are expressed. Demorphin is an opioid a thousand times as potent as morphine. Once the glands begins their work, the children will pet these new creatures, take up the opioid through their fingers and mouths, and they will stop feeling pain. Pleasure will rule them.

What a gift pain is. Once it is removed this way, life will follow soon after.

When I am done, the children will be gone, and I will regenerate my legs in the tanks I have not yet opened. Then I will walk the streets of the City, immune, and enjoy my masterwork.

I smile, and begin.

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I keep the process secret, locked in my lab. I don't need to await generations of breeding to arrive at my goal; I have the Gengine.

The Gengine is a reality engine, made over fifteen thousand years ago by the spider-limbed Snin. It procreates virtually from a known genestrand, making an entire synthetic world in which its creations live and breed, running thousands of generations in seconds, testing millions of branches of descent, behavior and chemistry in minutes. In a day or two, it pops out the genestrand for the desired end creature, and synthesizes a complete animal, using a vat similar to those now used for making bioandroids here.

My creature gets a name: Shix. I vat-clone it to get others, and they are shixen. They will breed; I have given them fluffy brown fur with gray stripes and mottling, and big startled black eyes, and I have shortened their tails to little wagging nubs. Their claws are tamed as well: no long needles, but tiny retractible pins that only come out for climbing hard surfaces. The fingers and toes are lengthened to compensate, so that they can cling to a child's arm or leg and ride along.

The shixen sing little musical phrases to each other, and groom together, and breed quickly. They would be no match for their streetrat progenitors in a fight, but they have no need of fighting. Their little demorphin glands solve that problem.

When I created the glands, I made their secretions as sweet as sucre, succulent, fruity and sour, and nothing that tastes the transparent ooze ever wants to stop. The demorphin kicks in later, and it binds the taster permanently to the pet.

Demorphin was my favorite toy in the days of my long-ago freedom. It was Alayre's downfall; she had prisoned me in her own drug-laced web, and I was forced to take the extreme measure of feeding my counterattack to her with kisses. Like my shixen, I am immune to demorphin—I always have been—but Alayre was not. She wasted slowly, turning a little grayer beneath her golden tone every day, until at last she knew; and as she knew, she died.

She had warned the City, told them of all my works. They came then for me, and locked me in stone forever. So they believed.

Now I test my shixen against a pack of streetrats, in a small closed room. An observation window gives me a full view. These shixen carry the active glands for demorphin, unlike those in which I will bury the genes for later appearance.

The rats range, climb, hiss, their coats dark and slick, their teeth bared; the shixen huddle at first, then spread out.

A rat approaches a shix, coat bristling; the shix lies down in a submissive grooming posture, and the rat is curious. It scents the secretions at the shix's neck, sniffs closer, and licks.

It seems magic. Soon the rats are all lying beside shixen, still licking them at

the neck. When the shixen stand up and move away, the rats lie helpless in the thick stupor of opiate intoxication.

I do not sleep. Within a few days, I have folded the expressive genes for this magic away, to activate and express themselves in the creatures' descendants. I am ready for the children.

In ten days, forty shixen have come from the vat, full-sized, eyes goggled in astonishment, ready to cling to anything warm and soft. In the remaining twenty days, I synthesize my cytomegalo-plague for the City's inhabitants. I feed it to the shixen, packaged in the bacteria I place in the fruit I give them.

The day comes, and Mama Jones arrives at my lab door. "Is it ready?"

"Yes. It was hard work." As I lie to her, I sweep the door open to show her the table where the shixen loll tumbled on their backs in a clump, munching on the soft blue-green kwakiat fruit they hold in their tiny hands.

The girl's pinhole eyes widen into dark amazement, and she approaches the table. "They're beautiful." I haven't heard such words from any of these children before. She extends a hand to one of them.

It feels her warmth, and takes hold of her thumb with its fingers. Then it drops the kwakiat and comes to her shoulder, hand over hand, tail-nubbin wagging. It sits against her left ear and makes a soft musical note in its throat.

She grins. "Now we can walk with the rich ones, and taaalk the waaay they dooo." She mimics perfectly the vowel tonings of the well-dressed curiosity-seekers who used to come to see me in my prison. Then she whistles piercingly, and the children crowd into the doorway.

The children take the shixen onto their bodies, feed them, pet them, croon to them; the shixen sing in response. It is instant bonding.

Mama Jones smiles at me, but her eyes are once again pinpricks of black in their red-target irises. "You did what I asked. But what else did you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"You are not tired. Your eyes tell me things. What did you do to these animals?"

"I made them as you asked." Always a positive statement, never a denial.

"We'll see." She tosses her head slightly, then grins provocatively at me. An amazing girl.

How perfectly she manages her speech, gliding without effort from the gutter-sounds of her filthy companions to the elegant, incisive, musical ironies of the wealthy women she sees through pitiless child eyes. When the demorphin begins its

work, I must be very careful with her.

* * * *

The days pass slowly now, as slowly as when the wall held me. The children only visit to clean and provide food. I tinker with the shixen some more, making their coats shimmer, giving their brains the tools for language mimicry, taking away the demorphin glands, and I name one of them after Alayre and speak her tones and accents to it.

The shix looks at me quizzically, and its tiny mouth forms the Taranese sounds I gave it, in a high soft pitch like Alayre's, "Jono, what will I do with you?"

Something in me leaps up at this, and I sit very still while my eyes dry again. I damn myself for this weakness, and then I teach the shix every little phrase Alayre would use on me in love. I damn myself again, and I forget to eat, and I feed this little creature and groom it and keep silent while it mixes the words of my dead love with its own squeaks and chitterings.

At last my obsession repels me, and I hear myself say to the shix, "Every place we choose is our home," in Share, in the accents of the girl Mama Jones. I must forget Alayre.

The shix says it in the voice of this street girl, catching even my own tiny failures of enunciation. I want to hear it again, and as I teach the shix to say other things the girl has said to me, I realize that I am simply trading one obsession for another.

Taking the shix in my hands, I wring its neck.

* * * *

Finally the girl comes one day on her regular visit, and her look tells me that she knows what I have done. She grins, the pupils of her red eyes tiny. "Your pets."

"Are they to your liking?"

That grating, choking laugh again. She reaches into a pouch at her side very slowly, and extricates a small mass of mangled flesh, holding it by the nubbin of its tail. "They'll make a good dinner for you. Here." She throws it on the floor by my chair, and leaves.

The specimen she has dissected reveals to me that she has found its demorphin-secreting glands. Unfortunately for my dinner enjoyment, I hadn't thought to make the shix better-tasting than streetrat.

I want to know whether some of the shixen had gotten free, whether some of the children had escaped being affected, but now there is no one to ask.

* * * *

The children have not returned for many days. Managing my bodily wastes is

troublesome, but with the Gengine I breed small sluglike sanitation creatures that handle the job quite well. By now the last of the City ichor is gone from my blood, and the skin I expropriated is truly my own at last.

I busy myself in my lab, testing out new Gengine variations on the shixen, working on new bacterial transporters for viral transformers. These little tools are widely used in this city now; the corporations who manufacture bioandroid servants like to upgrade their living human products using the viruses.

The conversations of passers-by, over many years, taught me the ways of these people. Bioandroids, or andros, are vat-bred human slaves here. Want to extend your andro's eyesight up into the ultraviolet? Give him some U-455 inhalant, have him sniff up the gene-changing viruses, and he'll catch a bad cold. Five days later he'll be seeing into the youvee, talking about the new colors. The fast-moving magic of viral transforms.

Got an andro mining crew running short on stamina? Infect one of them with Myo-92, and they'll all catch a case of muscle-cell upgrade. Since the bacteria are generation-clocked, the infection can't spread any further than you let it. But remember, Myo-92 leaves the subject with weakened resistance to a range of simple viral diseases, so be sure to inoculate your andros.

I listened well to the thrill-seekers staring at me in my prison, while they spoke of these things. Now I cook and eat the last of my latest special crop of shixen, vat-bred now for taste.

I am lonely: the realization penetrates my concentration like a bullet. The talking creatures I produce are no comfort; their behavior is to me as if I had held up a hand puppet to give myself enjoyment. I think of Alayre again, and then I realize I want to see Mama Jones, and I damn myself once more.

This loneliness is unlike any other feeling I have had. Rage, lust, hatred, greed, fear, all are my intimate friends, and I wore them as tightly as the wall-skin that held me for so long. Now I move about this apartment and lab in my chair, still walled in, but freedom fills me during my creating, a freedom that overcomes the prison of my hate. Something has changed in me. I fear it, and I long for it.

Shivering, I finish the day's work, and return to my main room to leaf through permtxts that hold images of my ancient life. As I open the first volume, the door clicks.

Mama Jones and Nemizanah enter. He dangles his plasma torch from one hand and watches me.

"Something has changed," she says. Her eyes are ruby and dark-pupilled. "There is a strange disease spreading through the City."

A hopeful question comes up in me, and I keep it back. "What kind of

disease?”

“You know.”

“Me?” My hopes rise. Perhaps these awful children have contracted it.

She laughs that way of hers again, the sound of sticks dragged over rough stone. “They found one of your animals. They aren’t fools. They are very afraid. People are dissolving and sticking together.”

“Sticking together?” It must be my plague.

“We will take you to see.” She gives a guttural screech, and several of the older children scuttle in and seize me. They haul me out to the corridor where a wheeled cart is waiting, lower me onto it, and push me off out and along the understreet.

Several cross-streets away from my lair, they slow down. Mama Jones points into a side corridor. “See?”

It is dark right now—the evening dimming of the City lights is almost complete—but little by little I make out a lumpy distortion of the corridor walls and ceiling.

“Take me closer,” I say.

“No. We don’t want to catch this disease.”

Propelling myself with hands on floor, I roll into the corridor. My eyes adapt to the dim light. A face, no, two faces, become visible side by side where the wall meets the floor. Their eyes are closed, and their expressions are peaceful. As I watch, I hear the susurrus of exhaled breath. They seem to be asleep.

Now I can make out their bodies, unclothed, fused, stretched many times a person’s height along the lower part of the corridor wall. Their tissues seem to have taken root in the very crevices of the wall; what is left unabsorbed of their skeletons is no more than a few ridges and knobs under their spread-out skins. Their heads have been flattened considerably, but still bulge outward, keeping the faces, ears and brains intact. Hands and feet, arms and legs, genitalia, all have become a part of a fused sheet of flesh reaching on down the corridor and into a utility recess.

Oh, this is perfect. If only I had made their human skins turn the color of my wall-prison, it would have been beyond perfection.

I reach out and touch my handiwork, rejoicing. One pair of eyes opens.

“Hello.” A man’s voice, soft and breathy. The lungs still work.

“Hello.”

“You are still free?” He smiles at me.

“Yes. Do you like this?” I smile back.

“We do.”

Now the other pair of eyes opens, and a woman’s voice says, “We like this.”

“Why?” My surprise must be apparent.

“We are together.”

I laugh, and turn and push my way back to the children. “Is this the only place this has happened?”

Mama Jones says, “It is happening everywhere. People are calling it the living City. Some of my children have joined it.”

At this I lose control of my astonishment. “What?”

“They say it is beautiful. Now everything comes to them, and they think together.” She smiles now, and her smile has a soft, dreamy quality to it, as if she has become a child again. “Did you do this to them with our pets?”

I look at the two wall-people, their eyes now closed again. Deep rage and frustration surge up in me. I snap, “I want a tissue sample from them. Then take me back to my place.” I want to hurt someone. The girl gets two children to push me, and she walks beside me. I ask her, “Do you want to be part of the living City too?”

She trails her fingers along the skin-wall. “I don’t know. It is a big step to take.”

“How can you want this? I don’t understand.”

She looks at me. “No. You wouldn’t understand happy people.”

“Do you?”

She stops, and so do I. “Not before,” she says. “Now, I’m not sure. Maybe being happy is possible.”

“Only possible?”

She frowns at me. “I don’t know. I will find out.”

“And then what?”

She gestures, and she and the others return me to my hidden apartment. I am shaken.

* * * *

Several days of testing and Gengine analysis on the tissue samples showed me

that everything I designed fell into place. But my changes apparently interacted with a series of andro upgrade viruses to create a vast range of wild mutations. A terrible suspicion comes over me, and I wait impatiently until Mama Jones returns with her escorts for the daily visit.

To my stupefied surprise, she comes to me and kisses me on the lips. I can say nothing for several breaths.

“Take me back to that couple, please,” I ask her.

“It has spread further,” she tells me. “We are going to join it too. That will leave you alone. Will you be all right?”

She actually cares for me? The thought beats at my defenses, and I repel it. “I will live,” I say. “Just leave me the cart with the wheels. Now take me to the couple you showed me before.”

They trundle me out to the understreet, and everything there has changed again. The walls and ceiling are living flesh, heads and sleeping faces pushing out from the stone surface like plant growths. Different skin tones span long reaches of the walls, making swirls of contrast here and there; a few stubby hands hang limp from the tissue-mass, evidently unneeded. It has happened faster than I imagined it could.

I push my way to a sleeping face. It was once an andro woman, pale-skinned; now she is a webbed smear of white among many darker colors. “Talk to me,” I say.

Her eyes open. “What?”

“Talk to me!”

“What do you want?” Her eyes start to sag shut again.

I slap what was once her cheek. A ripple passes out from the slap as in the water in a pond. All over the street, eyes pop open and peer out.

They are all interconnected.

I scan down the street. Few bare stretches of stone exist any more; it is as if the whole street has become one being.

I lean closer to the andro woman’s face. “Are you hooked to everyone else?”

She answers without opening her eyes. “We are one. The wires and pipes are a part of us.”

“Who are you?”

“I am part of the comm system,” she says drowsily. “Once I was a sex toy.

Now I live everywhere. In this street I care for the wires and lightpipes. It is good.”

“It is good.” Voices chorus from up and down the street.

Frustration burns in me. The andro genes, capable of fusing nerve tissue and photonic and electronic linkages, must have done this. I thrust my cart forward, reach up to a man’s sleeping face, seize it by the nose, and twist. “And what is your job?”

At my abuse of him, the wall quivers and surges back and forth. “I am the air regulator. I control the oxygen level here in the City’s depths. I have many faces. It is good.”

“It is good,” comes the chorus again. I cover my ears, too late. The chorus rises in a welling of celebration.

“I am the waste transport.”

“I am the wall anchor for this street.”

“We are the lamp regulators.”

“I grow blood-food in my belly.”

“We dream for the City.”

The babble of voices rises, and then coalesces into a croon, a random song that harmonizes itself and soars through the City air. I sit stunned. They must be lying. Their freedom is gone; how can they be other than vegetables, their awarenesses dulled somehow? I rub my hand along the skin of something that was once a human being, but then I realize that it is little Furusi, the plates of stiffened colored paper still clinging to his flattened chest as he stands now against the wall, a part of it. I stare at him. He giggles.

Mama Jones comes to me, and kneels down so that our faces are on the same level. She turns to Furusi and kisses him, and caresses his face and forehead. He laughs a soft, musical carol of childish glee, and turns his face from side to side a little, as far as he can before his wall-connected skin restricts his movement. “Come, Mama,” he says to her.

At this moment I wonder if I looked this way when I was in my wall-prison. No, I decide, I never smiled the way he is doing.

I don’t understand. How can they abandon their free movements, their lives, their independence? Their humanity? For this, to become City plumbing for human filth? I fought so long to attain what they had, and they gave it up to me and became what I had been.

“They are all fools,” I say to Mama Jones. “Now they are prisoners in the walls, and they can never be free.”

“That is not what they tell me. They play in the space in their heads. They all share in it.”

The andro space! How did they get it, unless ... Of course. Some of those who caught my plague must have been andros. With the shared circulatory system and my immunoharmonizers, the viruses must have passed along the reconstructive information necessary for the andro brain changes. So now they all have andro genes, and andro organs. That means they travel in the inner space that andros share.

Now these bodies are only their roots, in a space much greater, as vast as the sky far outside this capsuled city in stone. In that inner universe they grow wings and fly, soar beyond the air itself into starlit blackness, morph themselves at the touch of a thought, savor the scents and tastes and feel of fruits drooping from trees of imagination.

All this was once the andro reward for total slavery. Now it is free.

Mama Jones looks thoughtful. “They tell me it is beautiful. I didn’t believe them for a long time, but they have stayed happy. They are building new streets and homes and places in the City. Come with me.”

Before I begin my protests she trundles me off to an aswal, one of the thousands of street-crossing domes in the City, and stops under the center of the dome. She points upward.

Long millennia ago, and up to a few short months ago, this place had been a confluence of stores and shops, festooned with climbing ivies and filled with birdsong. Store signs and logos flashed and sang everywhere, and the smell of cooking morsels filled the flower-tinged air.

Now I see long, leafy vines hanging from the dome in patterns irregular and beautiful, their many colors shifting and shimmering with the light from the lamps, skins pale green, brown, pink, deep umber, rich violet, orange. Along each vine partway down its length grows a head. Some heads are round, others long and flat and narrow, like so many exotic fruit. The leaves are former hands and feet and ears, and even neatly-gathered plaits of hair.

These vines are people. They speak in drowsy murmurs to each other, sometimes shifting and swinging a little in the mild air-currents of the dome.

At the center of the dome a patch of flesh shifts, and a cracking sound reveals a crevice being opened above us. Some wall-dweller is opening a new space in the City’s infinite stone. Voices carol, chant, and then rock fragments fall to the floor of the crossing. Fragrances fill the air; I recognize a thousand florals, rose and lilac and iris and orchid, and some gentle intoxicants and flavorings.

The shelves and aisles of every shop teem with growth. A new commerce is here, done in vascular fluids and hormones, the fresh-minted currency of a

single-bodied City.

The girl Mama Jones is smiling, and her ruby eyes are soft and open. “You have given us a gift. My children have found a home now. Please come with us and join the City. It will be good.”

The walls nearby croon echoes, “It will be good.”

I back away on my wheeled cart. Words refuse to come. This girl looks nothing like Alayre, not now; she is instead alien to me, and awesome. I do not understand. All this beauty is utterly other, and my words fail to defend me against it.

“You will be cared for,” she says. “There is love for all of us.”

Love! The word itself stabs me. I have to return to my lab, to develop some new entertainments for myself, to wield some new weapon against the people who—

The people who ... my thoughts sag, my fury dissipates in a fog of frustration. Those people are long gone. “Go,” I say to her. “Take your children and join the City.”

“Come with us,” they say.

“No,” I say. “I am Jono. I have work to do.” And I turn and trundle away alone, back toward my hideaway, the walls of my mind scrawl-painted with living words like “love” and “gift”. As I approach the entrance to my corridor, I turn and look back. They are watching me, expectant, hopeful. The girl reaches out a hand in a last gesture of appeal.

As if she had cast a weapon at me, pangs of agony strike my chest. Now I find I cannot turn either way, and I sit legless in my cart, hanging in stillness in this city of living human walls, hanging between longing and rage.

My eyes are closed. I do not know how long I sit in the living corridor, where now a dim color-shifting light glows out of broad panels of what once was skin, and the sounds and scents are of a dream of paradise. How fast it all evolves! A throb fills the air, like the drums of the City’s many festivals, but deeper, surer; the skins of the walls pulsate with it, and I realize it is the beat of all the hearts, as one.

A dream of paradise. How do I remember what is paradise?

Thousands of years of hate stand in me, a convoluted city in which I am now lost and free, a stone place of my own delving. Paradise? Was there once a place by that name? Those I destroyed now weep in my mind. They will never stop.

A hand touching my shoulder makes me look up. The girl.

“Come,” she says. With a soft cloth she touches my cheeks, one, two; tears have rivered my stolen face, the face for which I have murdered casually. The tears run itching and hot down into my clothing. “They say you have much work to do.”

I nod. "I have done many things I can't repair."

"They know. They say you will do new things."

Now my fear is only of myself. "What things?"

She waves around us. "More of this. They want more. What can you not do?"

I want to say, "I cannot love," but I stop the words. Instead I say, "Will you show me what to do?"

"Yes," she says.

"Yes," say the living walls.

"Then, yes," I say. Fear grips me, and a wild energy sings through my mongrel pillaged body. Young hands turn my wheeled cart, and we move off together, into this growing living underground forest of flesh, flesh now grown into something more and still so strange.