



EXILE
OF THE
Mind
PART 1

JMWILLS

Exile of the Mind 1

Exile of the Mind, Volume 1

M Wills

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EXILE OF THE MIND 1

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Exile of the Mind 1

From above, the colony of Salopia appeared to be a dirty bubble of soap on the surface of Triton, ready to burst at any moment. Beneath the dome, gleaming towers hundreds of feet high poked up towards the underside of the bubble, as if reaching for the nearby planet of Neptune. The skies above were a reddish-grey haze from the light filtering through the constant wash of nitrogen rain outside.

Richard Marsh sat at the waiting area of the Isolation Chambers on the four hundred and fifty first floor of the most imposing tower. The large floor to ceiling windows across from him looked out on to the sprawling, towering mess that was Salopia. A vast nation-sized colony of millions squeezed into such a small land area that the only way to build was up.

Outside the window, red lights of warning beacons pulsed on and off while the steady yellowish glow of various tower rooms blazed out from the distance. Millions of others living their own lives. Every now and then an air car would burst through the gloom, lights flashing as it separated from the long line of vehicles below and brought some important person to one place or another.

Richard Marsh – fifties, balding, short and stocky – shifted in the light gray couch on which he sat and it shifted to match, the sensors reacting to his shape in order to provide optimal comfort levels. The reception area of the Isolation Chambers was decorated in an inoffensive beige and grey. A bland secretary sat behind the desk typing away. On a more progressive colony in the system she would have been an android, or a fully automated system. But not on Salopia. Here she was a flesh and blood person, the better to ensure there were no digital systems that could be compromised.

A screen on the wall kept trying to grab Richard's attention. On it was a closeup of Prime Minister Geoffrey Vaughn, his meticulously slicked-back black hair and trimmed goatee looking impeccably plastic. "This attack by the UN is not just on me, but on all of us. They don't get to decide who leads Salopia. Let the Salopians decide!"

It was almost enough to stir Richard to anger once again, if he wasn't distracted by his impending reunion with his son. He'd voted for Vaughn's party in the last three elections, where he'd solidified his hold on power with a tough-on-crime message, enforcing radical punishment measures on

lawbreakers and dissidents. Even though Vaughn's policies directly affected Richard's son, the Prime Minister had kept his word and eliminated the violence that had plagued Salopia, at least as far as Richard could tell. For that, Richard would vote for him again. Assuming there were any future elections. And if not, well, there were worse permanent leaders than Prime Minister Vaughn.

Behind Richard came the soft whoosh of a door sliding open.

"Mr. Marsh?"

Richard stood and turned to find a skinny man with the healthy rosy cheeks that only came from surgery. The collar of his jacket was the deep glossy black that symbolized the Manager class. He peered down at an electronic clipboard held in thin fingers.

But what checked Richard was what stood beside the man. It, too, had been a man, once. It was tall and broad. Its left eye had been replaced with an ocular implant that connected to the metal cap that covered its head, giving half of its face a robotic appearance. Its right arm was a solid metal lump, capable of being reformed into any manner of useful tools. Its face bore a neutral expression but looking at it made Richard's skin crawl. That was someone's body, repurposed into a tool, the mind that used to be inside probably kept somewhere in this very facility. He understood on a theoretical level that other servitors had been much more drastically enhanced until they were little more than living tools. But those were far below in the surface levels, not up here staring at him.

"You have a servitor," Richard said to the skinny man.

"Ah, yes. Yes. Orders of the Prime Minister. Their organic brains are much more reliable than any computer. Are you Richard Marsh?"

"Yes." Richard replied after a pause.

"Ah, yes, good. I'm Manager Tez. Please follow me."

Richard followed Manager Tez through the doors and down a corridor that curved around the outside of the building, giving them a panoramic view of the city below as they walked. Skycars zoomed around the building in an orderly queue.

"This is a, ah, unique case," Manager Tez said, consulting his notes. "Your son is Elliot Marsh. Twenty one years old. Male. Yes?"

Richard's gaze kept going to the servitor as it kept step silently beside them. "Yes," Richard agreed absently.

“Ah, Prime Minister Vaughn himself showed an interest in the case. Have you been, ah, briefed on your son’s status?”

That got Richard’s attention. “His status? He’s to be released, isn’t he?”

“Ah, yes, ah.” The man’s vocal tic was getting on Richard’s nerves. “Step into my office and we can discuss.”

Richard followed Manager Tez and the servitor into a grand office. A plush grey chair faced an ornate metal desk. Manager Tez gestured Richard to sit in the grey chair as he took place behind the desk. The servitor stood silently next to the desk, his empty gaze seeming to pass right through Richard.

“Your son, Elliot Marsh,” Manager Tez began. “Arrested for, ah, sedition against the government of Prime Minister Vaughn.”

“He was a protestor, that’s all! And I told him not to do it. He was a young idiot taken in by idealists.”

“He was convicted for, ah, leading and masterminding a protest that, ah, greatly embarrassed the PM.” Manager Tez clarified.

Richard had the sense that Manager Tez was stalling. “I know all that. Just return him so we can leave.”

“It, ah, seems there was, ah, an incident.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well...” Tez typed something into the keyboard on his desk and read the screen, then turned to Richard and folded his long, spidery fingers. “It appears that his original body is, ah, irretrievable.”

Richard blinked at him, not comprehending. “What do you mean?” He repeated. “The punishment has been completed hasn’t it?”

“Ah, yes—”

“My son’s mind has been put in isolation while the Prime Minister has done god knows what with his body.” At this, Manager Tez’s eyes flicked briefly to the servitor standing beside him. “Now you put his mind back into his body so we can go home.”

“It’s not that simple. You see his body has been, ah lost.” Manager Tez typed some more and peered at his screen. “It appears there was a mining accident. Your son’s body was minimally modified as it was intended his mind would be returned to it. Perhaps why he did not survive the accident. However, his body is no longer available to return to.”

Richard sat back in his chair, stunned. “No longer available? Prime Minister Vaughn promised fair punishments. Now my son is trapped in this

mind exile forever?”

Manager Tez turned to the servitor. “Servitor, fetch us some drinks. The gratcha from my special collection.”

The servitor nodded and headed out the door.

“I don’t want a fucking drink. I want my son back!” Richard pounded the arm of the chair.

As soon as the servitor left, Manager Tez tapped a button on his chair that made the door whoosh closed. He leaned forward and whispered hurriedly to Richard, his aloof manner set aside for the moment.

“The servitors function as Prime Minister Vaughn’s eyes and ears. He’s embedding them in every department.”

“What?” Richard was taken aback by the sudden change of topic.

“The PM doesn’t trust electronic devices because they can be remotely hijacked by the United Nations. Something impossible to do with organic humanoids.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I recommend you not criticize the PM when the servitor returns. Criticism could be considered dissident behavior. Accept your son’s condition and move on. It’s best for everyone.”

“What is my son’s condition? Permanent isolation?”

“No—” Manager Tez was interrupted by the door sliding open heralding the servitor’s return.

The servitor carried a tray containing a carafe of gratcha and two elegant glasses. It poured the purple liquid into the two glasses and handed them to Richard and Manager Tez. Richard sipped his, allowing the bubbly liquid to soothe him slightly.

Manager Tez took his glass and sat back, resuming his leisurely bureaucratic demeanor as though nothing had happened. “As I was saying, Prime Minister Vaughn regrets the, ah, inconvenience, but in his infinite wisdom he understood that accidents may happen and, thus, has implemented a program of alternatives.” Manager Tez set his glass down and typed on his keyboard some more. “Your son has served his, ah, sentence and will be provided with a new body. He will...” Manager Tez trailed off and frowned at the screen.

“A new body?” Richard said, stunned once more.

“Yes, the body of someone who has been placed in mind exile permanently and no longer requires their body.” Manager Tez said slowly,

brows furrowing in confusion. He leaned forward and typed some more, chewing on his bottom lip. "He will be placed...ah, interesting."

Richard tightened his grip on the glass. "What?" He growled.

"Ah, your son has been assigned a body by the PM himself and I am unable to change it. It is, I'm sure, the most fitting choice. If a bit, ah, unconventional."

"Who will my son become?"

"Ah, your son's mind will be placed in the body of Isobel Clarke for retrieval. You, ah, may have heard of her."

The name seemed familiar but Richard couldn't place it. "Who?"

Manager Tez swiveled his screen around so that Richard could see it. The image stunned him. Aware that the servitor was staring at him with the weight of Prime Minister Vaughn behind that blank gaze, Richard said nothing. He sat back in his chair, mind racing.

On the screen, a woman's soft face peered out. Wavy brunette hair framing a heart-shaped face featuring two captivating heterochromatic eyes - grey-blue with hazel inner rings. Those eyes had been featured on vidscreens all over the colony for the last several months during her arrest and trial. A triumph of Prime Minister Vaughn's new justice system as the petite 38 year old woman and serial killer had been convicted of seducing and murdering dozens of men. And now Elliot's mind would be in her body.

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Elliot's mouth was dry and he ran his tongue along the inside of it, only a moment later registering that he once again had a mouth. For two years he had been isolated in his own mind, slowly going crazy, and now he had a body again. He became aware of the mattress pressing against him as he lay on his back, the press of the crinkly paper gown on his body whenever his chest rose with each breath, the whirr of air filters somewhere in the room. The minimal stimulation was nearly overwhelming after so much time in isolation.

His eyes felt puffy as he cracked them open. The room was dimly lit. Somewhere above him two red diodes blinked calmly.

He was back. Back in his body. He'd been through worse than death. A mind trapped in stasis knowing the punishment would one day end but without any way to track time.

Elliot gingerly pushed himself into a sitting position. His entire body felt strange but he discounted it as the result of not having *had* a body for two years. Something silky whispered across the back of his neck and he rubbed it away. There was something wrong with his chest, a weight balanced there.

Two years gone. What had he missed? How bad had Prime Minister Vaughn made things now? Or had he been stopped?

Elliot's lips were cracked and dry and he ran his tongue over them as he let his eyes adjust to the dim light. He was in a small room. The cot he sat on was attached to the wall, on a monitor above it were displayed the words "Transplant Successful". A door to his left was closed. Another one, across the small room, was open and through it he could see a sink. Water would be good right now.

Elliot stood gingerly, his body swaying. He felt off balance and put a hand out on the wall to steady himself. His eyes hadn't yet adjusted. The light in the room was so dim he could barely see his hand where it touched the wall.

Elliot shuffled unsteadily towards the room with the sink. He tottered on his bare feet, his lack of balance probably the result of not having a physical body for two years. The paper gown brushed against his body and whispered against his thighs. Again, he registered faintly that something

was off about his body – his chest felt...bigger somehow, and his feet smaller. What had they done to him while he was away? Elliot had heard they often modified the bodies of isolated brains and put them to work in the mines. Had they failed to modify his body back before returning him?

The room seemed to sense he was awake and the lighting gradually increased, so that by the time he reached the sink in the other room it was as if dawn had crept through a window. Elliot reached out to the tap and paused, staring down at himself. The hand reaching for the tap wasn't his. This hand was slender, the fingers hairless, the nails slimmer and longer...and painted a deep red.

Elliot flipped his hand over, eyes tracing the delicate palm. The fingers were more delicate, softer somehow. It was a woman's hand. Elliot held up his other hand and found it was the same. The wrists more slender than his own. The forearms hairless and thinner.

Elliot lifted his gaze to the mirror above the sink. In the reflection, a woman stared back at him. She had a soft face, a gentle slope of a nose and pale, smooth skin. Her shiny, brunette hair was tied back in a bun, a few loose strands tickling her neck. Her eyebrows were dark and thick in a way that contrasted beautifully with her petite features and light hair. Light crow's feet were visible either side of her grey-blue eyes, the inner rings of which were tinged with hazel. An older woman, but younger than his mom. And definitely not Elliot.

Elliot's mouth dropped open and the woman in the mirror did the same. Elliot held up his hand and watched the mirror reflect his action. He grabbed his cheeks, pinching lightly, fingers grabbing the warm, soft skin. The woman in the mirror copied him. Elliot looked down at his chest and realized that the extra weight he'd felt had been the two breasts which now hung there, pressing out the hospital gown. He grabbed them, tiny fingers gripping the soft tits and jiggled them, feeling them move on his body, feeling his fingers digging lightly into the buoyant skin, the nipples brushing against the coarse paper gown sending unfamiliar sharp sensations through him.

Elliot dropped his tits and screamed. The voice that came out was high pitched. Womanly. He backed against the wall behind him, felt his more padded butt hit the wall. His hands rose to his mouth and he couldn't drag his eyes away from the hysterical woman in the mirror, still trying to

comprehend that it was *him*. Her eyes were glazed with tears. He screamed again.

From the main room, the sound of a door sliding open. A servitor entered along with a man in a white doctor's coat. The servitor had been modified so that his left arm ended in a small nozzle holding a syringe. Thin wires connected the nozzle to vials of fluids on its upper arm. That servitor had been someone once and was now just a mindless drone.

The servitor stood by as the doctor gently took Elliot by the arm. "Elliot. You're okay. Listen to me."

Elliot couldn't peel his eyes off the mirror. That was *him*. He was a woman. An older brunette. Maybe even someone's mom.

Together, the doctor and the servitor guided Elliot back to his cot. It was better when his gaze finally broke from the mirror. Though now that he wasn't staring at himself he could feel every difference between this body and his own. The way his thighs brushed together. The way his tiny feet padded across the floor. The way the silken hair tickled against his neck. The way his breasts bobbed gently at each step.

The doctor sat him down on the cot and shined a bright light into each eye while Elliot panted, unable to form words.

"You're okay, Elliot," the doctor repeated, clinically dispassionate. "Take a deep breath. Good. And another."

Elliot followed the doctor's instructions and felt his panic subsiding. "What happened..." He reached his hands up to his throat. That delicate throat. The voice coming from it was higher pitched. Breathier. A woman's voice. He tried again, attempting to ignore the fact that he was speaking with a stranger's voice, his tongue moving in a stranger's mouth. "What happened to my body?"

"According to the system there was an accident that left your body permanently incapacitated. You were given this one instead."

"You mean...I'm stuck like this?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Don't I get another choice? Can't you put me in a man, at least?"

The doctor glanced at the servitor and shook his head. "This body was a special delivery from the Prime Minister himself."

That took Elliot aback. His punishment was supposed to have been over. Two years without a body. But now it seemed that the Prime Minister was making his punishment permanent. It was vile even for Vaughn.

“You will adjust. They always do. I’m sending you a set of SysMail instructions on how to adjust to your new body.” The doctor typed something into the screen attached to the back of his forearm.

“Instructions? This has happened before?”

“It’s becoming more common as the operations are sped up in preparation for the strike force.”

“What strike force?”

The doctor’s armscreen pinged with a message. He looked at it and sighed. “Watch the news. Two years is a long time. Catch up slowly. There are some clothes in the in the drawer above your cot.” The doctor turned to the servitor. “Once he’s dressed, accompany him to the receiving room.”

The doctor hurried out of the room while the servitor remained still, looking blankly at Elliot.

“Can you at least turn around?”

“Negative,” the servitor replied, its voice gravelly.

Elliot turned to the cot and slid aside the door above it. It held a standard issue unisex worker’s uniform consisting of pants, a long-sleeve top, and cotton shoes, all in a drab grey. A small insignia of Salopia – a simplified grey building beneath a thin red line of the dome – was affixed to the right shoulder.

Elliot shrugged out of his cotton gown. The cool air of the room caressed his soft body. He couldn’t help but glance down at himself, eyes landing on the swell of breasts hanging from his chest. He looked away quickly, blushing in embarrassment for a reason he couldn’t quite identify. This was someone else’s body, should he be staring at it? He could still feel his breasts jostling and bouncing as he reached for the uniform and stepped into it, pulling the pants up his waist to blessedly hide the strange absence between his legs. He changed quickly, the servitor’s gaze from behind like a weight on him. Was Prime Minister Vaughn behind that gaze enjoying Elliot’s new humiliation?

Beneath the clothing was a new ID. Elliot’s new face and physical characteristics but his old name. Another humiliation.

Elliot slipped the cotton shoes onto his dainty feet and faced the servitor. The servitor gripped him by the arm firmly and guided him out the door and down the hallway at a steady pace. The corridor was lined with doors to other rooms. Were there others inside awakening to find

themselves in strange bodies? Or had Elliot been singled out for special punishment?

At the end of the corridor a door slid open to reveal a waiting room. Elliot's heart thudded as he saw his father standing there, beside a thin little man in a Manager's uniform. There was no sign of recognition on his father's face.

The Manager turned to Richard. "This is your son."

The servitor released Elliot and he took a few tentative steps forward as his dad gaped at him for a second. Then his face hardened.

"Dad?" Elliot said, his lower lip trembling, his mind suddenly awash with helplessness and an overwhelming sense of his new fragility.

His dad sighed. "Come on home, son."

That was the only greeting Elliot got as Richard turned and strode towards the exit, forcing Elliot to hurry to keep up. As they walked together in silence, Elliot registered the fact that he was now shorter than his father and he had to take almost two steps for every one of Richard's.

They walked in silence through the corridor and out to the landing pad. They were protected from the roaring winds by an invisible bubble that allowed a taxi skycar in. It drifted down in front of them, the door opening to reveal an empty front seat, a vidscreen showing the logo of the United Nations. Richard recoiled.

"No. No fucking robots. I want a human driver."

"Acknowledged," the car droned. The door slid shut and it drifted away.

"Goddamn UN," Richard muttered. "Prime Minister should just nuke them when they reach orbit."

"How can you say that after what the Prime Minister has done to me?" Elliot snapped, suddenly incensed that his father was still so stubbornly supportive.

"Still fighting against the PM?" Richard glared at his son. "Look where that's gotten you." Richard glanced down at Elliot's body with visible disgust before turning away.

An older model skycar soon drifted down. This time when the door opened they saw a driver. A pale man with a scraggly beard and a visor wrapping around his eyes. When he saw Elliot he did a double take.

"Whoa, whoa. Not taking *her*."

"He's not a killer. Her body's been repurposed," Richard growled.

Elliot handed the driver his ID. The driver scanned it through and shook his head, reluctantly letting them inside. Richard gave the man their address and the skycar floated off, joining the line of other skycars back towards Elliot's neighborhood.

They flew in silence, Richard resolutely refusing to look at his son. Elliot kept his hands in his lap, nervously rubbing his fingers together. Every now and then Elliot could see the driver glancing at him in the rearview mirror. At his infamous body.

As the skycar dipped lower the building levels changed, becoming older, grubbier, the light from above disappearing as they sank into the gloom of the mid levels. They were let off on the Lockesburg platform. Home of the capital of the colony, though the nicer neighborhoods were on the other side and above.

A door opened onto a vast open area filled with the noise of music and chatter and the smell of food. Here the ceiling sailed away three stories above while down on the floor vendors hawked their wares and entertainers danced and sang for passersby. Elliot and Richard wound their way through market stalls towards their living quarters. Elliot kept his head down and shuffled after his father, ignoring the stares and whispers around him.

It was a relief when they finally reached the relative quiet of Elliot's home corridor. Richard placed his palm on the pad beside the door of their living quarters, causing the door to whoosh silently upwards.

"We'll have to reprogram that for you," Richard muttered without looking at Elliot.

Elliot caught his dad's arm. "Do mom and Alice know about...all this?"

Richard shrugged off Elliot's hand and nodded. "I sent a SysMail from the Isolation Chambers."

Richard ducked inside, Elliot on his heels. He was glad to get off the streets and away from the curious onlookers.

"Elliot! It's so good to have you home!" Elliot's mom thundered towards him and embraced him.

She hugged him tight and he gripped her back, feeling his eyes start to water with tears.

His mom, Margaret, was thin and wiry. She clutched Elliot, murmuring in his ear, "My baby, my baby, my baby." She pulled back and looked him over.

She'd aged in the two years he'd been away. Her brown hair going grey. More wrinkles appearing around her eyes. But her eyes still twinkled and he still felt the strength in her grip.

"How does it feel to be back?" She asked.

"Mom, I'm not back, I'm..."

"Shhh," she hushed him and hugged him again. "You're back."

Elliot closed his eyes and sniffed away his tears. Why was he crying so much? It was like his emotions were more firmly on his sleeve.

"Oh my god. Elliot?!" His younger sister's voice cut through his thoughts.

He pulled away from his mom and wiped his eyes. Alice stared at him from behind their mom.

"Alice," Elliot said to his sister.

"Oh my god," Alice repeated, stifling a giggle. She seemed to be enjoying this. "Do you even know who you *are*?"

"Alice, go set the table for dinner," Margaret said, shooing her away.

"Aw, mom, I'm just saying hello to my new sister," Alice laughed, disappearing back into the dining room.

"Don't mind her," Margaret said. "Get yourself cleaned up. Dinner is almost ready." She hugged him again. "Go change out of that suit." She'd never liked the Prime Minister. It had always been an unspoken point of contention between her and her husband.

Elliot's room was sparse. A small vidscreen on the other wall cycled through Elliot's old pictures. There was with his arm slung around his friend, Patrick. Elliot's old body had a wry smile. He was wearing his favorite leather jacket with the gold bands on the sleeve. Real leather delivered from earth, not the synthetic crap they made on the upper levels. The sides of his head had been shaved, the top dyed white and combed back. His rugged face grinned out at the viewer. Elliot looked away.

A large vidscreen hung on the other wall. The corresponding virtual reality kit was bundled up in a built-in wardrobe that had several drawers containing his clothes. A frilly pink dress had been left on the bed along with a note from Alice: *You should get used to wearing stuff like this.*

Elliot crumpled up the note and tossed the dress onto the floor before sitting heavily on the bed, his head in his hands. The vidscreen didn't respond to his voice commands – he would have to reprogram it with his new voice – so he manually turned it on and brought up some old news

feeds of his new body. They weren't hard to find. It was a series of sensational murders perfect for the media.

As a 38 year old woman stalking younger men, Isobel Clarke had been dubbed the 'Cougar Killer'. She'd seduced a number of young men to her quarters before dismembering them. Security video captured of her showed her in a slinky outfit as she flirted with a victim at a bar. The more lurid feeds speculated about what depraved sex she'd had with them before – or after – killing them. Elliot shuddered to think what the body he now wore had been doing.

In every feed Isobel was calm and emotionless, those heterochromatic eyes staring out at the viewer as she watched her own trial dispassionately. The guilty verdict meant her mind was to be destroyed rather than isolated. Neither punishment was in line with United Nations protocols. And Prime Minister Vaughn's edicts and the increasing number of servitor accidents meant her body had to be preserved for use by someone else.

A newer feed announced that her body had already been repurposed, though it declined to identify Elliot as the new owner. Elliot turned off the screen. Everyone knew what this body had done. There was no way he could go out in public without attracting attention.

Elliot turned to his drawers and sifted through them for something to wear. The grey uniform was itchy on his bare skin and he needed to get into something more comfortable. His shirts were too long on him, but were better than his pants, which sagged down over his hips and clasped his wider butt. He cinched them up with a belt.

Elliot looked at himself in the mirror. The white shirt was baggy on him, and curved down over his breasts. On another woman – on one of his previous girlfriends – it would have looked sexy wearing his old clothes. For a moment he felt a hint of desire just looking at himself. His brunette hair was still tied back and messy and he gazed into his new beautiful wide eyes.

Slowly he reached up and grabbed one of his breasts, still in disbelief that this was *his*. He wrapped his fingers around it, feeling the soft give as he gently clutched it. So this was what it felt like to have tits? Despite it all, a little trill of heat sparked through him as he felt himself up, fingers gently coiling and uncoiling around the soft breast. He dropped it and bounced up and down on his toes, watching his tits jiggle beneath the shirt, feeling them bounce on his chest. So strange.

“Having fun being a girl?” Alice spoke up from the doorway behind him.

Elliot whipped around, hugging his breasts protectively. “I...I’m...” he stammered.

“And yet you still like tits?” Alice smiled, shaking her head. “Don’t worry, you’ll get used to them and then you’ll find them annoying.”

“Like you would know,” Elliot said, aware now that his sister was relatively flat chested and his breasts were bigger than hers.

“You’d look better in the dress,” Alice laughed.

“Get out of here.”

She shrugged. “Mom wanted you to know dinner’s ready. Sweetie.” She skipped away giggling.

Elliot shuffled to the kitchen and took a seat at the dinner table. His mom kept up a steady patter of conversation, filling him in on what he’d missed over the past two years. Which cousin had broken up. The local scandal of two neighbors swapping wives. The new stalls in the market. She seemed determined to act as if nothing has happened. As if her son wasn’t sitting at the table in the body of the most notorious serial killer in recent memory.

Richard did little more than grunt. Alice spoke up every now and then, usually with another dig at Elliot. Elliot stopped responding to her and ate his meal quickly. His mom had made his favorite food of baked pasta and the local cheese but it tasted different. Whether that was because of his new tastebuds or a change of ingredients he couldn’t say.

“You should go out and visit your friends, sweetie,” his mother suggested.

“I don’t want to see anyone.” Elliot muttered, digging listlessly at his food.

“I don’t know, mom,” Alice said mischievously. “Should she really be hanging around a bunch of young men? We all know what happened last time.”

“Alice!” Margaret shot her daughter a warning glance. Alice giggled and tucked into her food.

Elliot stood suddenly. “I’m done.”

He stalked off back to his bedroom without another word, ignoring the entreaties of his mom behind him. This time he closed and locked the door to his room before flopping onto the bed. At some point his bun had come

undone and silky brunette hair fell down his face. He pushed it back out of his eyes.

Jesus, this fucking body. He stared down himself, past his too-big shirt and pants to his tiny toes. The nails were painted red and elegantly rounded. Isobel had been caring for her body up to the point where her mind was removed from it. He wiggled his tiny toes, watching them move, still in disbelief that these girl feet were his.

Still it was good to be out of isolation. To *feel* the physical world again. He'd been so lonely. Without companionship. But now...didn't he have a willing woman with him?

Curious, he struggled out of his shirt and lay back down. His breasts flopped down either side of his chest and he took them in each hand, gently squeezing them together into soft mounds. He watched Isobel's hands caress her tits, feeling from inside and out as he stroked his soft skin, ran his fingers over and around each breast. Warmth flitted to life deep within him. His gaze remain locked on his tits as he fondled himself, fingers pinching and squeezing the deliciously weighty breasts.

Running his fingers across his nipples sent a shiver of longing through him. They were more sensitive than he was used to, hinting at even greater delights. Elliot tried stroking them and was rewarded with little electric pulses of desire. The nipples beaded out beneath his fingers, growing ever more sensitive as they grew sharper. He plucked a nipple, pulled it up between his fingers until the beautiful pain made him gasp, whereupon he released it and watched his tit bounce back into shape.

Restlessness invaded him. He needed to move his legs and suddenly felt confined in his pants. He unbuckled his belt and shimmied out of his pants, bending his legs in the air to pull off the pants. His naked body stretched out beneath him, pale and beautiful. The sight shot another shock of warmth through him. It was no wonder she'd been able to seduce men. Her body was incredible. Wide hips. Smooth thighs. Gentle calves. Her mound gently sprinkled with dark hair.

Tentatively, Elliot touched his new sex, fingers dragging up and down his entrance. His vulva clasped his fingers, warm and slightly slick to the touch, contrasted with the scratchy pubic hair. He followed the line of his slit up and down, not quite sure what he was doing, only knowing that it felt good and was incredible to watch.

It was a strange feeling desiring his own body, being turned on by the sight of himself being turned on. One hand still massaging a breast, his other hand continued to explore his pussy, stroking up and down, pressing deeper each time until a certain touch at the top of his slit made his toes curl and drove his head back into the pillow. He gasped lightly and followed that touch, fingers spreading his glaze across his newly discovered clit. It budded beneath his fingers, so sensitive, each stroke driving the warm restlessness through him.

Elliot bit his lower lip and closed his eyes, savoring the physical feel of his body as he played with his new tits and gently circled his clit. His toes stretched, entire body aching with tension that needed to be released. He gasped once, and the girlish sound drove his lust even higher. God, he wanted himself. Wanted to pleasure himself. Fill his tight new hole.

Dragging his fingers down, he slid into himself, feeling his cunt part as he penetrated his body for the first time. The spongy walls of his pussy clasped his fingers and he slid into his slickness, up to the second knuckle, following the warm walls of his canal. He curled his fingers up, stroking slowly, experimenting and following with what felt good. Soon, his palm rested on his mound, two fingers curled deep inside him to stroke the dimpled nub of his innermost pleasure. Desire roared through him and he fingered himself faster, the lewd sounds of his cunt loud in his ears.

His other hand tweaked his nipple, gripping harder, greedy for his new body. He plunged his fingers in deep, his breath coming in ragged gasps now as he fingered himself, chasing the tension higher, higher, until it broke suddenly. He cried out in a strangled gasp, hips thrusting up, fingers sinking in deep. His body shook, convulsing with pleasure around his fingers, toes curling, legs straightening taut, straining as pleasure shook him and released him, the tension suddenly snapping and leaving him warm and wet.

Elliot lay there a second, breathing hard, fingers paused inside himself. He was so sensitive. Too sensitive. Didn't want to move. And then suddenly he did. Dropped back down into desire. His fingers resumed their rhythm, sliding deep into his cunt while he resumed stroking his tits. His feminine gasps grew louder, driving him on again. The sound of a woman about to cum – the sounds from his own lips – made him even hornier.

He stroked again, in and out, fingers disappearing into his tight wet hole, reappearing slick with his juices. It felt so right to be filled, to have something inside him. His body needed it. Needed to be stretched apart and

so he continued stroking, in and out, faster and faster as the tension ratcheted up until with a breathy moan he came again. The orgasm shook him and he felt his cunt tighten around his fingers, felt moisture dripping down his thighs as he came. He shivered and shook on the bed, gripping a tit as if holding on while pleasure roared through him.

When it finished he pulled his fingers out of himself and rested, breathing heavily while the heat of the orgasm died to dull embers. His post-orgasm clarity was accompanied by shame. How could he do this with someone else's body? But then, this body was his from now on, for better or for worse. At least he'd discovered *one* thing that was for better.

3

Elliot awoke the next morning hoping the whole thing had been a nightmare. But when he rolled over and felt the weight of his breasts shift on his chest, and his silky hair fall into his face, reality snapped back into place. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, the contours of his face still strange and soft beneath his fingers.

It was almost midday. No one had bothered to wake him and why not? He'd been automatically enrolled back into the employment pool when he was released but, so far, his vidscreen alerts showed him no jobs had yet accepted him. No one wanted a killer like him.

He had no job. Nowhere to be. It was like starting life over.

He dressed quickly in the oversized shirt and pants he'd thrown off last night, trying desperately not to look at his body as he did so. In the bathroom, Isobel's face reflected back at him from the mirror. Eyes puffy with sleep. Hair a tousled mess. It was a far cry from the sexy woman on the news feeds who'd seduced all those young men.

He relieved himself – an awkward, uncomfortable moment – and slumped out of the bathroom, not even bothering to try to make himself more presentable. His sister was at school, his mom and dad at work. Who was he trying to impress?

He listlessly opened the refrigerator and eyed the leftovers, but spied a pot of his mom's biotic yogurt and something made him grab it. He'd never particularly liked it before and didn't even know why it was calling to him until he took a little spoonful. God, it was magic on his tongue, bringing back the hint of something that wasn't quite a memory but a *feeling*. And not Elliot's feeling. Was it possible that some of Isobel's desires were inside him? After all, the hardware of her brain hadn't changed, only the software of Elliot's mind running it. The past connections were still there.

Elliot ate the yogurt right out of the pot as he walked around his house. Not much had changed in two years. New covers on the furniture. The wall display opposite the kitchen set to show a canyon so that it look like the house was built right on the edge.

Elliot sank onto the couch, unconsciously crossing his knees beneath him as he did so. Before he could bring up any feeds he had to reprogram it

to recognize his new voice and handprint. At least running through the technical setup temporarily took his mind off his situation.

When he did get the vidscreen on, the news feeds were abuzz with the standoff between Prime Minister Vaughn and the United Nations. A representative of the United Nations was speaking.

“...condemn in the strongest possible terms the barbarous punishment of mind isolation and body re-use. We urge the Prime Minister to step down to avoid conflict.”

The view returned to the news reader and Elliot waved away the option to change the appearance of the newscaster, leaving it at the default handsome young man. His appearance and voice were pleasing in a weird way.

“The United Nations Space Force has sent the warship Hamlet with the intent to take control of Salopia. It is expected to arrive within six months. His majesty, King Phillip II has issued a statement in support of the UN’s actions.”

Salopia was technically still under the dominion of the United Kingdom. Though colonies as deep in the outer system as Salopia were only nominally controlled by their Earth countries, given the distance and travel time. Even with a Faster-Than-Light drive, travel time was measured in months.

The vidfeeds played a snippet from one of Prime Minister Vaughn’s recent speeches. He was wearing his ceremonial cloak and stood on a wide dais overlooking a crowd in one of the Great Halls.

“We will not be cowed by the terrorists of the United Nations. Our destiny is our own and we will defend our right to govern ourselves as free people. What do people on Earth know of Salopia? They don’t know our hardships. Our struggles. Our hopes and dreams. So I say to the warship Hamlet, ‘We will not give up and we will not surrender!’”

The feed returned to the newscaster but Elliot tuned him out. No one in Salopia had yet found a way to get rid of Prime Minister Vaughn. He’d twisted the constitution and bent the rules and cowed Parliament with his supporter’s threats of violence. Maybe the UN could free them from all this? A part of Elliot hoped it was so, and was drawn back towards the fight against the Prime Minister’s tyranny. But then he looked down and saw his dainty hands, the rise and fall of his breasts, and wondered whether the fight had been worth it. He’d lost so much – this body was 16 years older than

his mind! – and had very little to show for it. A few protests. Some vandalism. What had it all accomplished?

With his voice now programmed into the vidscreen, he searched for more information on Isobel Clarke. Yesterday he'd simply skimmed the newsfeeds but now he watched them and the accompanying online commentary. Learning about his new body was like probing at a sore tooth; it hurt but he couldn't stop himself. Online was filled with vitriol from most, praise from a scant few miscreants, and speculation about Isobel's motives and what she'd done to the men she'd killed.

The hands that Elliot now used to swipe through the feeds were the same ones that had poisoned food. Strangled and cut. Soothed and stroked. How the hell could he ever get used to this?

The SysMail from the Isolation Chambers doctor was no help. A bunch of fluff about mediation and having a mantra. Some sort of exercises where he was supposed to look at himself in the mirror for increasing amounts of time. No. No way.

Elliot returned his attention to the lurid details of Isobel's crimes. He was still reading through all the public comments when his father returned home, grimy from his work inside the ventilation shafts. He saw Isobel's face on the vidscreen.

"Turn that shit off," he growled.

"They sent a warship," Elliot said. "The UN."

"Are you still against the Prime Minister? Even with your situation?"

"*Because* of my situation," Elliot shot back. "He claims he's fighting tyranny but *he's* the tyrant."

"Isolation taught you nothing, did it? I trust the Prime Minister. We're no one's servants, least of all the UN."

"You're brainwashed." Elliot spat.

"You're a freak."

Elliot tightened his lips and stormed off to his room where he cycled through the feeds of Isobel again, as if understanding her would help him understand himself. When his mom returned home she knocked on his door and he let her in. She sat beside him on the bed and tousled his hair.

"Honey, you shouldn't be looking at that." She turned off the vidscreen and Elliot said nothing. "Why don't you go out and see your friends? That would cheer you up."

Elliot looked at her silently, tears beginning to streak down his face. She didn't get it. His old life was gone and he didn't have a new one. He was in some terrible limbo.

Elliot took his food to eat in his room and came out only when his family was gone. He found himself craving his mom's yogurt as well as alcohol. He snuck a brew from his father's stash and had only half-finished it when he realized he was getting drunk already. Alcohol hit him hard in this petite body.

He liked watching the newscaster construct, and let the handsome young man's words drone on in the background as he admired the construct's face. Imagined his hands on Elliot's hips, his lips on Elliot's. Before Elliot knew it, he'd slid a hand down his pants and found his pussy, wet and ready for him. He stroked himself, eyes locked on the handsome young man on the screen, fingers sliding into his wet heat, plucking him higher and higher until he came, shivering and moaning on the couch with thoughts of riding the young man. The post-orgasm clarity when he came down made him embarrassed and ashamed and confused. Had he really just fantasized about sex with a man?

After three days of moping about his father had had enough. He locked Elliot out of the vidscreens.

"You need to go out and get a job."

"No one wants me! I haven't gotten any alerts from the Jobs Department."

"Then go out and find something under the table. I don't care. Just don't be here." Then he added with disgust, "Maybe you can put that body to good use."

Elliot stormed away but it was clear his father wouldn't let it go.

He pounded on Elliot's door. "I'm leaving for work in an hour. You better be out by then."

Elliot made himself shower, hands roaming across a feminine body that was becoming more familiar by the day. His sister took pity on him and showed him how to brush his hair and offered to do his makeup.

"No way," he said.

"Come on, you can be my baby doll," Alice teased him. "At least let me make some clothes for you. Isobel may have killed people but that outfit you're wearing is the real crime."

Alice had the replicator generate some new clothes for him. It measured him and spat out clothes to Alice's specs: a simple sleeveless red top and jeans, as well as a bra and panties.

"I expect you to pay me back for this," she said.

"I *have* pants."

"You need pants that fit your body. You can't go out dressed like that," she gestured to his too-big jeans.

He felt better when he'd gotten dressed, even after struggling for a bit with the bra. Something about being dressed in clothes that fit his new body was comforting. Maybe another residual desire from Isobel.

Still, Elliot hesitated until his dad practically pushed him out of their quarters. For the first time since he'd come back home, Elliot was out in public. Keeping his head down and avoiding everyone's gaze, he made his way out towards the edge of Lockesburg. Down corridors and elevators that grew grimier and noisier the farther away he moved from the city center.

Out here the residents tended to distrust the central government and dealt in illicit credits. It also happened to be where some of his previous friends lived. The rent was cheap and the government didn't bother with them. Mostly.

Elliot didn't know if his friend, Patrick, still lived in the same place but he tried anyway, ringing the faded red door of the quarters. A moment later it slid up and Patrick was there. A young man the same age as Elliot – or, the same age as Elliot used to be – with wire-framed glasses and neatly combed red hair.

Patrick gasped when he saw Elliot. He stepped back and jammed the 'close' button on the door but Elliot put his hand out to stop it.

"G-get away! You're supposed to be erased!" Patrick shrieked, retreating back into his quarters.

"Patrick! Patrick! I'm not Isobel! I'm Elliot!" Elliot cried raising his hands in the air to show he was unarmed.

"You're—What?" Patrick said, pausing at the end of the hallway.

"I'm Elliot," Elliot repeated, his voice cracking. "I was put into Isobel's body after the isolation. Here, look." Elliot fumbled in his pockets for his ID and handed it over.

Patrick reached out to take it, still trying to keep as much distance between them as he could. He ran the ID through the scanner on his forearm.

“Elliot?” Patrick looked up in disbelief. “God, Prime Minister Vaughn did this to—” His face suddenly went white. “I mean, I’m sure it was an accident. This was for the best.”

“What are you talking about? Have you lost your mind? You protested with me. It’s a wonder this didn’t happen to you!”

“You need to go,” Patrick said, visibly shaken. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I was never involved in protests,” he said loudly and distinctly as he shooed Elliot back out the door. “Even if I was I sure as hell wouldn’t tell a spy like you.”

Patrick jammed the door closed and this time Elliot let him. Even in this predicament, his own friend thought he was a spy. Prime Minister Vaughn truly had made everyone paranoid.

Visits to his other friends had similar results. Many wouldn’t even let him in. All turned him away in fear. Fear of who he looked like. Fear that he was a spy. Fear of the government seeing them together.

Elliot blindly wandered the corridors of Lockesburg, drifting ever farther outwards and down. The few grimy windows looking into the outside world grew darker as the buildings surrounding the capital building blotted out the light. He passed others like him, outcasts, misfits. Those who recognized the body he wore kept out of his way, whispering and pointing. Most ignored him, too busy caught up in their own troubles.

Elliot was deep in his troubled thoughts, wondering if there would ever be a way out of this hell he was in. Slowly, metallic squeaks and rhythmic bangs jolted him out of his ruminations and he realized he’d wandered into the Mech halls. Here vehicles were taken apart, repaired, modified. Dealers down here took credit without asking pesky questions about ownership.

A sign caught Elliot’s eye: *Aldridge’s Automatics*. He drifted toward the shop, where someone was kneeling in front of a vintage skycar, welding mask on, the blue light flickering brightly, thick protective gear wrapped around his body. Elliot had a childhood friend named Simon Aldridge whose father used to work down here. They’d been friends back in simpler times, before all the troubles, and had lost touch long before Elliot was isolated.

When the young man in the welder’s mask flipped the mask up to wipe his forehead, Elliot recognized his long-lost friend.

“Simon?” Elliot said, stepping over the threshold of the shop.

“Yeah?” Simon looked up at him. “Do I know you?”

There was not a hint of recognition in his eyes as they swept over Elliot's body in a way that made him exceedingly self-aware. Elliot stood up a little straighter and cleared his throat to say something but then thought better of it.

"No. Never mind." Elliot turned to go but just then an older woman – Simon's mother, Diane maybe? – came out of the office in the back holding an electronic tablet.

"Simon, new orders came in on this—" Her eyes flicked to Elliot and she stopped. "Oh my god. Elliot?"

Elliot blinked at his real name. "H-how did you know?"

"It's been all over the feeds, honey," Diane said, a pitying look on her face. "Oh, dear. Look at you. I'm so sorry."

Simon looked back and forth at the two of them. "You want to fill me in here?"

"This is Elliot Marsh. You two used to be inseparable, remember?"

"I don't remember a lot about Elliot but I do remember that he was a guy."

"Simon," Diane sighed. "You never watch the feeds. Just like your father."

"What's the point? They never report the real news anyway." Simon shrugged. He looked back at Elliot. "Are you really Elliot? What happened?"

"Simon!" Diane admonished.

"No, it's fine. I should go, anyway." Elliot turned and headed quickly back the way he'd come, jamming his hands deep into his pockets.

Neither Simon nor his mom tried to stop him.

Elliot's eyes blurry with tears, he barely looked where he was going and took a wrong turn into an alley, nearly barreling into a scrawny youth.

"Hey pretty thing, what's wrong?"

"Nothing." Elliot attempted to step around him but the youth sidestepped to block his path.

Elliot looked up at him then. The guy wore a tattered leather jacket but was bare-chested beneath, his skin a mess of scars and tattoos. His teeth were crooked as he grinned down at Elliot in a way that made Elliot deeply uneasy.

"Just trying to get home," Elliot muttered, "I don't want any trouble."

Elliot turned around but found his way blocked by two other gangly youths.

“We don’t want any trouble, either,” the first one said. “We just want a little fun.”

There was the **snick** and suddenly a knife blade had slid out of the first man’s forearm, the sharp steel protruding past his closed fist. Elliot glanced at it and for a brief instant could feel his hand wrapped seductively around the man’s hand and the blade, could feel his other hand suggestively caressing the man’s scarred chest until his resistance melted and Elliot could guide the blade in, slicing there, there and there – across the throat, beneath the ribs, a jagged line through the cheeks – quick jabs that would make the slick red blood flow. The feeling disappeared as suddenly as it had come, making Elliot shiver.

“An upper decker come to visit down here would make a tasty little treat,” the first one continued, licking his lips in a vile, suggestive gesture.

The men pressed closer to him. Elliot felt so small and fragile in this body. Whatever power Isobel had had wasn’t available to him. The first man reached out to stroke his cheek when someone spoke up behind him.

“Leave her alone, Asher, before I knock out the rest of your teeth.”

Simon stood in front of the entrance to the alley, backlit by the neon mechanic’s signs from the shops behind him. He’d shrugged off the welding armor and mask and wore a smudged grey singlet and baggy pants. The light played across his solid biceps, made sharp mountains of his broad pecs. At his side he casually held a large electric wrench that nearly touched the ground, the end already blazing white with heat.

The first youth – Asher – snarled, “Simon, don’t you have to get back to daddy’s garage?”

“The woman is under my protection.” Simon casually raised the wrench. “Unless you think the three of you are enough to take me?”

Asher weighed it up for a second and then the knife retracted back into his forearm. Asher held up his hands. “We were just having a friendly chat.”

Elliot hurried back to Simon, the other two youths stepping out of his way. Simon placed his hand on the small of Elliot’s back and guided him back towards his shop.

“Thank you,” Elliot whispered.

“You shouldn’t be out here alone. Not looking like that. I don’t understand what’s happened to you but you should go home.”

Simon insisted on paying for a skycab and saw Elliot safely into it. It flew around the outside of the capital building that housed Lockesburg, depositing Elliot back at the market entrance where he trudged back this family's quarters. He marched straight back to his room and threw himself on the bed, breath hitching in his throat as he sobbed into his arms, the fear and desperation pouring out of him.

4

The next morning Elliot was awoken by a soft tapping on his bedroom door.

“Go away,” he muttered.

“You need to get up so you can go to your job,” his mom called softly from the other side of the door.

Elliot tossed the covers off and trudged to the door, hitting the button so it would slide open. “I don’t have a job,” he growled, angrily swiping the mess of brunette hair out of his eyes.

“You do,” Diane insisted. “At Aldridge’s Automatics. Diane messaged me yesterday out of the blue. Said you’d gone all the way down to the Mech level. We were talking and, sort of, one thing led to another, and she agreed to let you work as a receptionist in their shop.”

“A receptionist?” Elliot blinked. “Aren’t those roles automated, or don’t I need the implants or something.”

Diane shook her head. “Not down at the Mech level. Go on and get dressed.”

“It’s a crappy, dead-end job in a dangerous level. I don’t want it.”

Diane sighed. “You know how your father feels. This is not up for debate. If you live here you have to pitch in.”

Elliot didn’t really have a choice. He was once again forced to borrow some of his sister’s credit for new clothes, choosing a rather plain black and white pantsuit. Alice offered to do his makeup and, after his mom cajoled him into making a good impression, Elliot reluctantly agreed.

“But keep it light,” he said.

He sat still in Alice’s room as she dabbed on the foundation then brushed his cheeks and lashes and highlighted his brows. When she finished the woman in the mirror was gorgeous. Alice hadn’t done much more than highlight Isobel’s natural beauty. He blinked slowly, his pretty heterochromatic eyes staring back at him from beneath dark lashes and striking brows. Looking at his new face like this, Elliot could understand just how easily Isobel had been able to seduce people.

Elliot took the public lifts down to the Mech level. The lifts started out full, emptying as the lift dropped until there were only a few people left exiting on the Mech levels. Simon was waiting for him at the exits.

The top button of Simon's shirt was unbuttoned, revealing a glimpse of his solid body. He had a handsome, narrow face with a few days growth of stubble. Tousled blonde hair stuck out at funny angles that gave him a look of insouciance. Elliot's heart skipped a beat when he saw him and he chalked it up to nerves.

"Asher shouldn't bother you anymore but I thought I should walk you to the shop anyway."

"Thank you," Elliot said, a smile teasing his lips.

The conversation as they walked to the shop was awkward and stilted, but Elliot was thankful Simon didn't ask about his current situation. Instead, they talked about their families. Simon's dad, Robert, still worked in the mechanics and was slowly transitioning care of the business to Simon. Diane helped out when she could, though she was also on the public maintenance committee, which took up a lot of her time but also allowed her to get deeply involved in every aspect of the Mech level.

"And what about you?" Elliot finally asked. "You were going to be an engineer, weren't you?"

"Yeah," Simon ran a hand through his blonde hair. "Was. Things change."

They'd reached the mechanic's by then, which seemed to give Simon an excuse to drop the subject. Diane bustled out.

"Hi, Elliot, come over to the office and I'll get you set up."

Diane steered him into the cramped office next to the garage and ran him through the systems. A large wall made of glass looked out onto the mechanic bays, where Simon and Robert were working on separate skycars. The light glinting off Simon's biceps had a curious way of drawing Elliot's eyes.

"You'll find a lot of people down here don't trust the AI, so they'll want to deal with you personally," Diane said, bringing him back to the present.

The work was mostly dull. Registering and accounting and scheduling. Work that higher levels would automate but that were done manually down here so as to stay out of the central automated systems. People down in the mech levels didn't trust the government – any government – and were especially wary of Prime Minister Vaughn as he continued to roll out troops and servitors to quell dissent elsewhere in Salopia.

Diane stayed with him that first day, walking him through everything and gossiping about some of their clients. As a member of the maintenance

committee, she had access to privileged information, which she hinted at with a slight smile. She just yearned to gossip about it, and Elliot guessed if he waited long enough he would find out everything about the inhabitants around these levels. Not that he was interested. He mostly just wanted to get through the day. He also picked up a distinct tone of pity for his situation. She was handling him softly, assuring him that she would continue to handle this process or that person. Like he was some fragile thing that would break at the slightest conflict.

During lunch, Robert came into the office to take Diane out. He gave Elliot a pitying look before he left. The pity just made Elliot feel worse. He watched as Diane stopped on her way out of the shop to talk to Simon. There was a lot of shaking heads and some pointed looks back towards Elliot.

Elliot remained at the desk behind the vidscreen flicking through various newsfeeds. He looked up when he sensed someone in the doorway and saw Simon standing there. He'd once again stripped down to his undershirt, his shoulders and biceps streaked with grease. There was something deliciously appealing in the way he stood there, muscles sheened with sweat, gazing levelly at Elliot. Beneath the faint scents of grease and rubber was something masculine and intoxicating.

"You going to eat?" Simon asked.

Elliot shook off the thoughts he'd been having about his friend and shrugged.

"Well," Simon said, "Do you want to come with me while I go?"

They locked up the shop and wandered towards the park, which was little more than a double-storey open space bounded by huge windows that looked out into the gloom of the Salopian atmosphere. The silence between them stretched out awkwardly. Simon bought Elliot a kabab and they took a seat on a bench to watch the skycars high above and the occasional flash of sparks from the mines far below.

"How's the job so far?" Simon finally asked.

"Fine, I guess. I mean, no offense, but it's not what I saw myself doing when I was in college."

"Bet there's a lot you didn't see about your future."

Elliot bristled. Simon was poking a sore spot and he knew it. "I certainly didn't see myself working in a dump down on the lower levels," Elliot retorted sourly.

Simon laughed it off. “Yeah. Life doesn’t care about your plans.”

Something about Simon’s nonchalance ate at Elliot. Simon was so damned confident Elliot just wanted to wipe that smug grin off his face. Shove their lips together, dig his fingers into Simon’s rock hard pecs and—

A servitor marched past their bench, breaking into Elliot’s thoughts. The only time he’d been grateful to see a servitor. This one had been augmented with a rifle along one arm, and a series of lenses where his eyes had been. Recording. Policing.

When he disappeared, Simon muttered, “Fucking scum. There have been more of them recently. They work for him you know.”

“I know.”

“You must really hate him. After...what you’ve gone through.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Elliot said. There was still a chance the servitor was lurking there somewhere recording him. Elliot didn’t want to tempt Prime Minister Vaughn’s ire any further.

“It’s okay,” Simon said, leaning closer to Elliot’s ear. “No one on these levels likes him.”

It wasn’t Simon’s words but his presence that made Elliot shiver. The warm breath in his ear. The scent of sweat. The heat rising from Simon’s hard body.

What was happening to him? He’d never been attracted to men and yet for a blink he wanted to stretch out against Simon’s body, trace the sharp line of his muscles, press their lips together to feel the hot breath on his tongue.

Elliot pulled away and took another bite of his kabab. “We should get back to work.”

“Ok,” Simon said, cocking his head and looking down at Elliot as if trying to figure him out.

Elliot’s days fell into a rhythm that was comforting for all its banality. He woke and dressed, gradually accumulating a revolving wardrobe fit for his new body. Afterwards, he went down the lifts to the Mech levels where Simon escorted him to the shop. The minutes crawled by until lunch, when Simon would take him out and introduce him to the local cuisine.

Gradually, Elliot got used to the lay of the level and met the other mechanics along the rows. Many of them knew of his predicament and hinted at their disdain for isolation punishment and the Prime Minister.

Though none dared outright say anything against Vaughn, unsure where Elliot's loyalties lay.

Over the next few weeks, Elliot got reacquainted with Simon. Simon still had his idealism, though it had been tempered somewhat by an experience Simon hinted at but never fully revealed. Simon was quiet and thoughtful and confident without being cocky. Gradually, Elliot opened up to him, complaining about the way his – Elliot's – father disdained him, his mother pitied him, his sister teased him.

Elliot found himself picking out new pieces for his wardrobe. Outfits a little more revealing. Showing off flashes of thigh or shoulder or cleavage. Something about dressing that way made him feel more comfortable but it wasn't until he watched old vidfeeds of Isobel that he realized that some of his outfits were very similar to hers. He shrugged it off as coincidence. But what he couldn't shrug off was how her victims so resembled Simon. Young. Handsome. Strong.

Elliot found himself staring at Simon from the office as he worked. At walking near Simon so that their hands would accidentally brush. At sitting so close to him on the bench at lunch that their legs touched. Elliot tried to deny his feelings, telling himself the flush of warmth at Simon's smile was just relief of being understood. That dwelling on every glance or shy look for some hidden meaning was normal. That the coil of heat in his belly whenever their bodies touched was just coincidence.

Simon seemed oblivious to Elliot's advances, which only made the feelings more intense. Elliot couldn't tell his parents and he wouldn't tell his sister, even when she remarked how happy he looked when he returned from work. His father had gotten off his back now that he was bringing in credits. Richard still barely spoke to his son, and left the room whenever Elliot entered, like he was embarrassed that his big strong young son had become a tempting middle-aged woman.

Elliot began spending more time in the shop to get away from his family. At least Diane and Robert's pity came with some degree of acceptance. And it was easier to be with people who hardly knew him from before. That's what he told himself, anyway, as he waited in the brightly lit reception room while Simon toiled away in the shop long after they were supposed to have closed. Simon's muscles glistened in the sharp light, sweat leaving a trail down his shirt and making it cling to his body.

One night, about four weeks into his new job, Elliot was again behind the vidscreen after Diane and Robert had left for the day. Elliot didn't belong at home and he didn't belong here, but at least here they didn't make him feel like a failure. He was flipping idly through the feeds when he heard the metallic clang of dropped equipment followed by a string of swearing from Simon.

Elliot went into the shop and leaned against the near wall. "Problems?"

Simon bent and grabbed a wrench off the floor. "Yeah, I need three hands to put this fucking thing back on."

"I've got an extra hand."

"You might get dirty."

"Do I look like I care?" Elliot said.

Simon looked him up and down, making Elliot keenly aware of the pretty blouse and loose black pants he was wearing.

"Yeah."

"Well, I don't."

"Okay, come here."

Elliot approached Simon and bent over the engine he was working on. There was a small, fidgety nut and bolt that Simon had Elliot push down on with two hands as Simon twisted it into place. Simon was careful not to pinch Elliot's fingers as they slowly reattached the bolt. At one point Simon ducked under one of Elliot's arms, his shoulder pressing up against one of Elliot's breasts. Elliot colored, his body growing warm as Simon grunted and twisted, seemingly oblivious to where he was touching and what effect he was having on Elliot. Finally, the bolt rotated into place. Simon tightened it and stepped back with a satisfied nod.

"Thanks. This damn thing is finally done. I need a drink. Want one?"

"Uh, sure," Elliot said.

Simon retrieved a bottle from beneath one of the many counters, and then shoved a wheeled chair gently towards Elliot. Simon leaned against a workbench along one wall and swigged from the bottle before handing it to Elliot. Elliot sniffed it and winced. It smelled like gasoline. Simon laughed at his reaction.

"I made it myself. Guaranteed not to make you blind," Simon grinned.

"Who guaranteed it?"

Simon pointed to himself. "Haven't gone blind yet."

The smell was so strong Elliot held his nose as he gulped. It burned down his throat and made his eyes water. He handed it back to Simon.

“Mmm, good,” Elliot coughed.

Simon laughed and took another swig. “Probably not good for women.”

“Give me the bottle,” Elliot said, determined to prove to Simon he was still a man.

This time Elliot forced himself to take three glugs before smacking his lips. “That’s the worst thing I’ve ever tasted.”

“Yeah, it sucks,” Simon agreed, “But it gets the job done.”

Indeed it did. Elliot was already agreeably warm. This new body had a lower tolerance for alcohol and the fuzzy feelings hit him all at once.

“Ever thought about buying real alcohol and *not* burning out your throat?”

Simon took another swig. “The good stuff is in the midlevels. I’m not going there. Mids are a bunch of entitled pricks who are more interested in keeping us down than improving anyone’s lives.”

“Hey, *I’m* a mid!”

“You’re one of the good ones.”

“Did you really just say that?” Elliot sat up.

“You can’t trust anyone who has a vested interest in keeping the regime in place.”

“If you’re just going to write off a whole group of people then you’re never going to get anywhere.”

“Look what they do to us,” Simon said, gesturing to Elliot’s body.

Elliot stood suddenly, sending his chair rolling back to crash against the skycar behind him. “To *us*? What the hell have you been doing? This happened to *me*. I was standing up for what I believed in while you’re sitting down here being stepped on and doing nothing.”

“And now you’re *her*.”

Elliot took a step towards him, hands clenched into fists. The room swam. His body was flush with rage and alcohol. “Better than being you.”

Simon set the bottle down on the workbench with a thump and glared at Elliot. “And what did you gain, really? What did organizing a protest get you? A pair of tits.”

“You’re scared,” Elliot said. With Simon sitting on the workbench they were roughly the same height. Elliot came closer, the anger he’d been

holding back for weeks unleashed on Simon. “You’re scared of Vaughn. You’re scared of me.”

“Fuck you. *I* saved you from Asher. Remember? You’re welcome.”

Elliot’s heart was pounding in his chest. He leaned closer to Simon’s face. The scent of his masculine sweat, the heat of his body nearly overpowering. “You’ll never be safe as long as Vaughn is in power and the sooner you realize that the sooner you’ll get off your ass and do something. How can you not realize that you’re next?”

Simon stood suddenly and Elliot took a step back as his friend loomed over him. Simon’s face was set in a scowl. “Big words from someone who’s been hiding in the lower levels.”

“Coward,” Elliot spat.

“Bitch,” Simon growled.

Elliot looked up at his friend. His body was hot, feverish, hands still clenched into fists. He was vibrating like a string. His breasts heaved with each breath. They stood glaring at each other for a second.

And then they were on each other. Elliot on his toes, pressing his lips against Simon’s, forcing their bodies together, forcing Simon to take a step back until he hit the workbench behind him with a dull *thunk*. Elliot grasped for him, grabbing his shirt and yanking him close, lips eager for his taste. Simon clutched Elliot, rough hands gripping the smooth fabric of Elliot’s top. He panted into Elliot’s mouth, pressing closer.

Their tongues met, eager mouths gasping, sharing each other’s breath while Elliot yanked open Simon’s shirt, sending the buttons popping off into the darkened shop. His delicate hands pressed against Simon’s hard chest and made him shiver with a deep longing he didn’t know he had until that moment. Isobel’s longing.

Elliot pushed Simon back until he sat down on the workbench and then Elliot straddled him, pressing their lips back together. They gasped, eager and desperate for each other, their hands roaming, gripping, exploring. Elliot pushed Simon’s shirt off his arms, running his fingers down Simon’s solid biceps then back to his chest, then twinging into his hair, wanting all of him, Elliot’s body a twist of desperate need.

Simon grabbed Elliot’s top and wrenched it down. Elliot struggled out of it; let it drop to the floor. Simon’s hands fumbled for Elliot’s bra, unclasping it. One hand supported Elliot’s back while Simon’s other hand slid round to cup one of his juicy tits. Elliot moaned into his friend’s mouth,

Simon's hands seared his insides, sending heat radiating right down between his legs. His body *craved* the touch of this young man.

Elliot threw his head back and gasped as Simon pinched his little pink nipple, already swelling with desire. Simon bent his head and sucked on Elliot's other nipple, the warm wet heat of his mouth exploding across Elliot's sensitive breast. Elliot dragged himself across his friend's lap as Simon feasted on his breasts.

Seeing someone so eager for the body Elliot was trapped in made the blossoming heat quicken through him. His pulse pounded and he grinded harder across his friend, feeling Simon's cock harden beneath his pants. Elliot's tits jiggled and bounced beneath Simon's touch as Simon made his way back and forth, licking and sucking on each ripe, round breast. Elliot moaned again, a deep feminine sound, as Simon grazed his teeth across one of Elliot's sharpened nipples.

The heat built deep inside Elliot. He felt himself growing wet. They grappled with each other in animalistic desire, kissing, groping, as they wrenched off each other's pants. When they were naked, Elliot pushed Simon back onto the workbench. Simon's cock stood proud between his legs and he gazed at Elliot with absolute lust, eyes flitting down Elliot's soft form, the form Elliot had adjusted to over the last few weeks. The sight sent a little shiver through Elliot, driving the wetness between his legs. Something deep inside him craved it. Isobel's desires were his.

Elliot straddled his friend again, dragging his slick slit up and down the underside of Simon's cock as it lay trapped up against Simon's belly. Elliot dug his fingers into Simon's back, moaning with lust as Simon gasped into his mouth, breath hot and masculine. Simon's slick rod traced the path of Elliot's slit as Elliot grinded on him, lubricating him with his juices. Simon grabbed Elliot's bubble butt, fingers digging into the soft skin, *yanking* him closer.

Simon dripped down his thighs, little shivers of pleasure spiking through him each time his friend's cockhead slid up his sensitive clit until he couldn't take it anymore. Elliot reached between them and grabbed Simon's thick cock, angling it up before sliding down onto it with a long groan of satisfaction as he was filled. Each beautiful inch slid inside, spreading him apart and he drove down, down, until he sat in his friend's lap and held his cock entirely inside his molten body.

Simon gripped Elliot's thick ass with one hand while the other came up to grab his tit again. Their mouths remained crushed together and Elliot filled himself on Simon's cock. He dragged his pussy up, leaving himself breathlessly, aching empty for a beat before quickly dropping back down. He moaned into Simon's mouth as they fucked, Elliot's body rocking back and forth on his friend's hard cock. His tits swung, ass jiggled as he bounced on his friend's dick, sweeping back his hair and throwing his head back while he filled himself.

The tension twisted through him, winding him tighter, forcing him to rock harder, quicker. He wanted to fill himself, feel the cock deep inside, feel it bump up against the nestled head of his inner pleasure, feel the walls of his cunt being stretched around the thick manhood. He began crying out now, eyes clenched shut, voice rising in pitch as desperate pleasure overtook him. He couldn't think, could only feel, could only fuck as they rocked as one, bodies nestled perfectly together like two puzzle pieces. Elliot's voice filled the room, his hair tickling his back, Simon's hot breath on his tits, calloused hand on his rear, gripping, pulsating, pounding, until the tension inside Simon snapped.

He came hard, crying out as sparks flew in his vision. His cunt clenched around his friend and he grabbed on to Simon's rock hard body to steady himself, the masculine scent of his friend sending him deeper into ecstasy. He was aware of Simon grunting in his ear, of his cock throbbing inside him and then a burst of heat seared his insides and the pleasure overwhelmed him. His voice broke as he cried out, a strangled sound of lust as they came together. Simon gripped his hips, thrusting up, deep, deep into him as he came, emptying his cock into Elliot's willing body.

The orgasm was long and intense, making his whole body shake and leaving him wet and weak. He clung to Simon, head buried in Simon's neck, the masculine scent surrounding him as his body shook with aftershock. Soon all he was left with was the perfect felling of being filled, of having a warm cock nestled so firmly within him. When Elliot finally stood up, he felt the acute aching emptiness.

They tumbled into the spare bed on the second floor of the shop, drunk and sated, where they passed out nestled together.

Elliot awoke the next morning with a dry mouth, a headache, and a deep pulsing ache inside him. For a second he was disoriented until he remembered the events of last night. Looking behind him, he found Simon

asleep beside him. Shame and regret and longing filled Elliot. He didn't know who he was or what he wanted. And then Simon snorted and rolled over, throwing a hand around Elliot's soft body, finding his breast while he nestled against Elliot's backside, morning wood rising against the curve of Elliot's ass. And suddenly things seemed much better in here. If only he never had to leave.

Faint shouting from outside drew his attention. Behind him, Elliot snorted and woke, rubbing his eyes. He stood, and Elliot followed his naked form as he went to the vidscreen on the wall and waved it on. It showed a view from outside the shop, flames pouring from a shopfront across the walkway, servitors gathering to push back the growing crowd. Even here on the lower levels, trouble had followed him.

To be continued...

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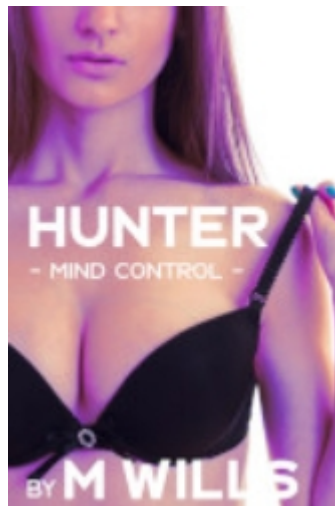
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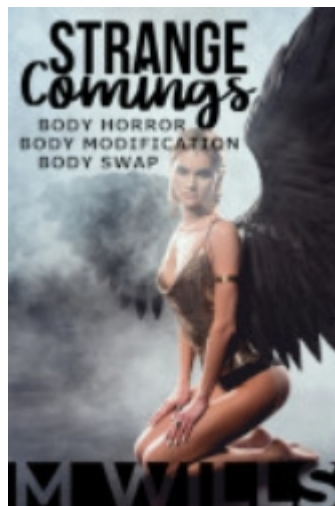
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