On Ghosts and Demons

By: B. L. Tetcher

“I must say, I was a bit surprised to get your call Doctor Johnson,” Doctor Mahesh Dhat said to the tall woman standing at the slanted windows of the operating gallery. At first she didn’t respond or show any awareness of having been addressed. Then she stirred, shifting her gaze from the young man sitting on the examination table in the operating theater below, and glanced to the short Indian standing next to her.

“I didn’t have any choice,” she replied with an ever so slight shrug of one shoulder. The object of her concern was currently sitting in his hospital gown, staring into the palms of his hands. He was in his late twenties with wild brown hair in desperate need of a trim and a scraggly beard. His frame suggested an athletic history belied by the beer gut it was currently sporting.

“I thought you’d never even suggest such ‘radically experimental, morally questionable, and highly Dangerous’ methods to him,” Mahesh prodded impulsively. He was in his mid thirties with a wiry 5’6” frame and short curly black hair. He was also the best dressed person in the room, sporting a very expensive black suite.

She winced, hearing the very words she’d uttered not two months before. Somehow the expression’s lines added something to her pale thin face. She was an attractive woman, despite her tendency to emulate the high fashion of 1950’s librarians, complete with short hair and thick glasses. She was even wearing high heeled shoes, making her tower over Mahesh’s Indian form.

“I didn’t know what else to do,” she admitted eventually. “He was getting worse.”

“Worse than drunken bar fights?” Mahesh asked.

“He was starting the slide,” she stated. “A few weeks after your . . . demonstration he got into an altercation with his wife.”

“And?” Mahesh asked.

“And then he downed a bottle of pain pills,” she replied bluntly. “Fortunately she walked in on him in the middle.”

“Which didn’t mean you had to embrace this particular brand of insanity,” the last person in the gallery stated from the chair in the back. Mahesh was secretly impressed that he’d been quiet this long. He was a heavyset man only slightly taller than the Indian researcher. His face wore carefully sculpted facial hair (most likely in compensation for the lack of same on his head) as well as an expression of severe skepticism. “There are plenty of other viable, proven therapies that could make a significant difference in this case,” Doctor Frank Gibbons added.

She sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “I find it interesting that you choose to renew this argument after our arrival at the Tata Institute Doctor Gibbons,” she observed dryly.

“If you’ll recall,” he replied primly “this is hardly the first time I’ve renewed it.”

“Yes, well you’ll have to forgive me,” she replied. “After the sixth or seventh iteration of the same arguments in favor of drugging my patient into docility it all begins to blur together.”

“Which is at least three iterations longer than should be necessary,” Gibbons retorted forcefully; a little too forcefully if her stiffening shoulders were any indication.

“Look Sarah,” Gibbons continued in a softer voice “just because some hack didn’t pay attention to your father’s drug interactions doesn’t mean you should completely ignore a proven field of therapy. And it certainly doesn’t justify treating your patient like a guinea pig.”

“Actually we used primates,” Mahesh corrected stiffly. This project had been his brain child and the resulting technology was the product of three years of his skull sweat.

“I can’t deny the potential in this,” Gibbons replied placatingly; apparently he preferred to antagonize only one person at a time. “All I’m saying is that just because you need a new approach doesn’t mean you should go with the brand new one. Not when there are more tried options available. All I’m asking is that you try to see the benefits.”

“I am trying to free him from his demons, not pad their handcuffs!” she replied sternly.

“Sergeant O’Brian’s catecholamine levels and corticotrophin releasing factors are unusually high,” the older man replied, reciting the man in the other room’s file from memory. “That’s kept him in a heightened state of stress. When you couple that with the unusually high activity in his HPA axis it suggests that he’s having recurring flashbacks which are almost certainly obstructing his recovery. His mind never left the triggering event, and by now those mental behaviors are so ingrained within his amygdale that his brain has become a broken record repeating the same pattern of thoughts over and over. He’s also failed to respond to generic cognitive behavioral therapy, eye movement desensitization, or holographic reconstruction. Any of the newer drugs I’ve brought to your attention could help to kick him out of that spiral.”

“Only to leave him with a dependency issue?” Sarah asked incredulously, turning on him. “The brain is one of the most adaptable parts of the human body. You know as well as I just how easily it can become dependent upon those drugs to retain any new pattern you might impose. And that’s not even considering the side effects *of* those drugs.”

Gibbons leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “This is why I wanted you for my team, Sarah,” he said, seemingly at random. “I knew you’d fight tooth and nail against pharmacological intervention. And that’s a good thing,” he added with a slight smile. “Believe me, there are plenty of ‘psychiatrists’ out there ready to prescribe first and ask questions later. But one of the hardest realities for anyone in this field to accept is that there’s only so much we can do. And sometimes the better is the enemy of the good.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” she asked, arms crossed.

“It means sometimes you have to take whatever you can get. We’re not magicians or gods. If you keep holding out for a miracle you risk losing your patient entirely. What will you do if this treatment doesn’t work?” he asked her. “That is of course assuming that your patient’s brain hasn’t been fried like yesterday’s onion rings first.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Mahesh said.

“I’m sure you wouldn’t,” Gibbons retorted. “It’s not your brain being strapped to an untested machine.”

“Oh, it’s extremely well tested,” Mahesh assured them.

“I find that hard to believe,” Sarah put in. “How many people could you possibly find willing to risk their brain -their very self- to test such a device?”

“What? With a planet of gamers eager to risk deep frying their brains to be able to use the world’s first true virtual reality device?” They both blinked in unison at that; clearly such an application of his technology had eluded them. “You didn’t really think we had to resort to preying on psychologically troubled vets to test this did you?” he asked pointedly.

“Fine, it’s as safe as eating cheeseburgers,” Frank conceded snappishly “but the question still remains; what will you do if this doesn’t work?”

“I don’t know,” Sarah answered before crossing her arms in front of her chest and turning back to the window. “What are they doing to him now?” she asked a moment later, a clear bid to change the subject. Down below the techs had Tom’s head and chest wired like a Christmas tree.

“It looks like they’re just about finished calibrating the helmet,” Mahesh replied gamely. Inventors never pass up a chance to talk about their devices. “Every person is a little different, so it helps the connection to have an accurate scan of the subject’s synaptic potentials,” he explained, unasked.

“What about Lieutenant Scott?” she asked.

“She’s in a different room,” Mahesh replied, his tone darkening. “We were concerned that seeing her might color Tom’s perceptions.

“How very perceptive of you,” Frank replied dryly.

“Did you have any issues getting permission from her family?” Sarah asked, ignoring Frank’s sarcasm.

“None,” Mahesh replied adding a shrug at their dubious looks. “The lieutenant is a marine from a long line of marines,” he added. “The procedure may have seemed a little odd but they understood.”

“How are you scanning her?” Sarah asked.

“Pretty much the same for the most part,” Mahesh replied “although there is obviously a larger inherent chance of error than normal.”

“How much do you think she’ll remember?” Sarah asked.

We’re not sure,” Mahesh answered. “Short term memory isn’t stored the same as long term memory. It-” he started, getting cut off by one of the techs throwing him a thumbs up. “Ah, we’re ready now,” he said instead.

Down below the young man laid down on the bed. They could only see from his chin to the bottom of his nose for the helmet he was currently wearing; it looked as if it had been cobbled together from various science fiction props. Cheap science fiction props.

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“This is just a mild sedative,” the tech assured me as the needle pierced my skin. “Just relax and take deep breaths,” she advised in surprisingly lightly accented English for a denizen of India.

There was a weak urge to ask her if she’d be able to relax if it were her being strapped to an experimental device meant to manipulate her mind, but I let it pass. It really didn’t seem that important. Then again, not much had seemed that important for some time now.

Instead I tried to take her advice. It was harder than I’d thought it would be though. I’d expected that my apprehension would ease at the approach of this experiment, yet at its cusp I found that the butterflies in my stomach had begun some sort of aerial battle. It was strange. I knew I couldn’t continue on like this. It all had to stop. Well, one way or another, it would soon. Either this insane attempt at therapy would work or my brain would be fried in its juices. If the former then . . . well I actually hadn’t planned that far ahead. And if the latter, well planning wasn’t really necessary. Either way, problem solved. So what was it that had my digestive tract writhing like a python?

That question was still ricocheting around my head when I found myself suddenly riding a lift; a terribly familiar lift. I’d only used it once in my life, but it had become a constant prop in my nightmares.

But this felt different . . . not dreamlike at all. I wasn’t sure if that was better or worse really. Every detail felt real. All the scratches and imperfections from use were there. The smell of metal with just a hint of bad fish was just as I remembered it. It was so real that just the sight of the button with the ‘open’ symbol on it filled me with dread. I didn’t want to leave the lift. I didn’t want to go into that room.

‘And really, why should I?’ I asked myself angrily. This entire escapade was stupid. After all, holographic reconstruction hadn’t worked. Why would virtual reconstruction be any different? What the hell had I been thinking volunteering for this mad scientist’s experiment anyway? What could I possibly get out of it? Redemption? Release? Forgiveness? Or had I been secretly hoping it *would* fry my grey matter like this morning’s bacon?

I wasn’t sure anymore, and for some reason I found that even more frustrating. How was it that I didn’t even know what I was doing? And why had I had to come all the way to India to realize that? It was just another example of how out of control I’d become; how insane.

Suddenly my anger turned inwards, finding a new outlet; my own stupidity. Here I was standing at this door, afraid to go any further, unable to go back. As if I really had a choice . . . as if I’d ever had a choice.

Snarling at this latest insane situation I’d placed myself squarely in the middle of I jabbed the button and stepped into the room.

As rooms went it was nothing special. It was rectangular with the door I’d used at the end of one of the long sides. Further down that side was an L shaped console mounted to the wall. A metal table opposed that on the opposite wall leaving a small walking space between them. Each was followed by a fire break set a few feet further down.

Aside from that sickly green tint it could have been any number of security checkpoint rooms on any number of human planets. But it wasn’t a human room any more than it was a human planet. It was a Zrillahy security room . . . *the* Zrillahy security room.

At least the room’s deceased occupants weren’t in attendance. But she was, looking just as I’d known she would. She was leaning against the table, arms crossed over her armor and helmet off, staring at me. I’d never found Jane to be a pretty woman. Solid was probably a better adjective. Her jaw was a little too wide and her nose a little too long and pointed. And while I’d always liked redheads she kept her hair too short for my tastes. That and the contrast between her pale skin and black armor always made her look sickly to me; a situation not improved upon by the lighting.

Not that she was even remotely close to sickly. On the contrary she’d always kept in amazing condition. I’d never been able to decide if she was butch or just manlier than me. But whatever you called it she’d always kicked my ass in virtually everything soldierly. And I’m fairly certain she’d been going easy.

Just seeing her brought the engagement in my stomach to new heights. I didn’t want to be here. All I could think of was that I had to get out of there. I couldn’t do this; anything but this. I actually started to turn back to the lift when her voice slammed me to a halt.

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“Wait,” Sarah cut in upon seeing Jane’s image in the holographic tank they were using to monitor Tom’s progress. “I thought you said you’d be using Jane’s military holo for this.”

“We did,” Mahesh replied, just as confused.

“Those aren’t class A’s,” Sarah replied pointedly.

“I’m aware of that,” Mahesh replied tartly.

“I think the relevant question here is ‘why not?’” Frank supplied from the other side of the tank.

Then it was Mahesh’s turn to rub the bridge of his nose. “This is cutting edge technology,” he reminded them, managing to limit his tone to that of only slight exasperation. “And it’s being put to a novel use for the first time. You knew there’d be unexpected deviations.”

“But why this one?” Sarah asked.

“I don’t know,” Mahesh replied quickly. Then he cocked his head slightly. “Considering that this facility was destroyed we were forced to rely on his memories to build the environment. Perhaps this is how he sees her.”

“Or perhaps that’s how she sees herself,” Frank suggested.

“Possibly,” Mahesh agreed with another shrug. “Either way I don’t see how it’s that important.”

“I don’t need his guilt getting in the way of this,” Sarah replied quietly.

“You wanted realism,” Frank pointed out. “If this is how he sees her it will only make the whole experience seem more authentic.”

“Maybe,” she replied, still unconvinced.

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“Hello Sergeant,” Jane called out in that guarded tone of hers. She sounded so much like she always had that it was difficult to believe she wasn’t really there, leaning nonchalantly against the table. It seemed so real.

So real, in fact, that I got that same nervous self conscious feeling I always had as her hazel eyes flicked up and down my form. “You’re out of uniform Sergeant,” she observed in that questioning/warning tone she had. “And you look like shit,” she added, eyes resting on my face.

“And you look like death,” I blurted unthinkingly.

She grinned at that. “I’m aware I’ve always been quite pale,” she replied. “What’s that nickname I’m not supposed to know about; The Ghost of Death?” I flinched at that suddenly unamusing old joke before centering my gaze on a patch of floor between us.

“So what’s your excuse?” she asked when I didn’t respond.

I glanced at her long enough to ascertain that she expected a response before looking away again. How could I explain the last year to her? Where did I start? Could I even tell her?

It was inexcusable; I’d known for nearly two weeks that I was going to be here. I’d known what questions would be asked. I knew what I needed to tell her. So why couldn’t I?

“Tom, where are we?” she asked warily, cutting into my self-derision. “This looks like a Zrillahy installation,” she added.

“It was,” I told her.

“Was?” she asked, raising her right eyebrow.

“You,” I started before changing to “it was destroyed.”

“I destroyed it?” she replied, eyes narrowing. “I don’t even remember it!” she said, scanning the room as if looking for a reference. “Apparently I didn’t do a very good job,” she observed.

“Well, no,” I stammered. “I mean yes. You did do a good job.”

“And yet here we are,” she stated looking straight at me, demanding clarification. I knew better than to deny it, although it occurred that she might not be able to throttle the information out of me here.

“This is a-” I started, feeling more and more idiotic “-well, I guess recreation is the best description.” Why the hell couldn’t I just tell her?

“I see,” she said in that tone reserved for people who didn’t. “So to recap, we’re in a recreation of a Zrillahy facility that I don’t know anything about, but apparently destroyed,” she said. “Care to start making sense Sergeant?” There was that warning tone again.

“It’s . . . well you, I mean,” I said, stammering even harder than before. “It’s a long story,” I said finally, furious with myself. What the hell was wrong with me?

“Try me,” she grated. She’d never had much patience for games.

Again I opened my mouth to explain, but again found myself holding back. I wanted to tell her. Well, if I was going to be honest that was the last thing I actually wanted to do. I couldn’t figure out why though. What was I afraid of? What could be worse than what I’d been going through already? And she deserved to know.

“Tom, am I going to have to unstick the rotors?” Jane said, flashing the ghost of a grin. It was a joke from our first mission. She’d seen right through my guise of composure and said ‘Don’t worry about freezing sergeant. I discovered a long time ago that people are like my Gramps’ old laptop. When they lock up you just have to administer a finely calibrated jolt to get the rotors working again.’ Translation: Freeze up and get whacked in the head. Very few people knew enough about early computers to get that joke. Of course, it was only a joke if you didn’t freeze.

My skepticism that she could actually inflict any pain within a virtual environment reared its sarcastic head again, but the memory of Jane’s punches argued forcefully against finding out.

“This is where you died,” I blurted out in a rush. Contrary to conventional wisdom getting it out did not make me feel any better.

“Really?” she asked again, sounding both surprised and amused. “This gets better and better. First the room is pristinely exploded. Now *I’m* pristinely exploded. You’re still not making any sense Sergeant,” she said that last with no humor at all.

“I’m not a sergeant anymore,” I corrected her.

Her eyes flicked back over me. “What: you’re a civilian now?” she asked. I nodded.

“And when exactly did this happen?” she asked suspiciously. I could imagine how she felt. Her last clear memory of me was as the tech assigned to her squad of Marine Raiders. They’d been none too happy with that initially, but had accepted the necessities of having someone on the squad that could react to Zrillahy tech. It had helped that I’d had no problems keeping up in the field and didn’t freeze . . . much.

“About six months ago,” I told her.

“So, here we are hanging out in a simulation of an enemy security room that I apparently destroyed. I’m dead and you’ve been a civilian for six months, when I know damned well you still have three to go, making a grand total of nine missing months. Does that about sum it up?”

“It’s actually a little over a year,” I told her. “I re-upped,” I added to her quizzical look.

“What the hell for?” she asked, aghast.

“Well, there is this little thing called a war on,” I replied sarcastically.

Her eyes narrowed at that. “And you really thought your best contribution to that effort would be to tote a rifle?” she asked only slightly incredulously. I grimaced in spite of myself. That wasn’t exactly the first time that particular sentiment had been expressed. I’d never been able to make any of its authors understand; no matter how hard I tried. I couldn’t understand that. Other people enlisted and it was fine. I might have been drafted but what was so wrong with choosing to continue?

 “What about your wife?” she asked suddenly, cutting into my thoughts.

“What about her?” I asked. Hell, at this point she was probably wishing I was still in the service too.

“I seem to recall you looking forward to being with your family again,” she prompted. “And from the bits and pieces you shared from her letters I kind of got the impression it was mutual.”

“It was,” my mouth said before my brain could tell it to shut up.

“But not anymore?” Jane asked.

I sighed, regretting my renegade body parts. “I don’t think so,” I admitted.

“What changed?” Jane asked, clearly unwilling to just let such a sensitive subject drop. Tact never had been one of her strong points.

“We . . . had an argument,” I told her. Of course there was more to it than that, but I just couldn’t bring myself to say it. Besides, my home life wasn’t any of her business anyways.

“Just one?” Jane replied sarcastically. “Well if that’s all it takes she must be a lot flightier than you ever let on. Must be a real bimbo you married,” she added watching me, as if looking for a reaction. But I was too stunned to respond. How dare she talk about Angela like that, especially after everything she’d put up with from me already? “How shallow can you be?” she continued. “Luckily there’s a quick fix. I mean, if you insist on being with someone that shallow you could always just buy her something shiny-“

“I hit her, alright!” I snapped angrily. I’d never seen Jane like this. Was there something wrong with her avatar? They’d mentioned something about a larger margin of error.

She didn’t say anything, just pushed herself off the table she’d been perched against and started walking over to me. Watching her I realized that I was no longer so sure that a simulation would save me from her temper, and very sure I didn’t want to test that particular hypothesis. But I refused to take that step back that my body was earning for.

“What was the argument about?” she asked, stopping within easy reach, hers not mine. I supposed I should have expected that she’d ask that too. Jane was the last person to assume that a man was automatically wrong for hitting a woman. But I wouldn’t lie about what happened; I refused to confirm what she already seemed to think of my wife.

“She wanted me to stop drinking,” I told the wall next to her.

“You don’t drink,” she replied with a scowl.

“It’s a relatively new development,” I replied sarcastically.

“How new; wait, six months right?” she asked.

Which was a fair guess, I supposed. Not that I’d ever been against alcohol back when I’d been a member of her team; I’d just usually found my entertainments elsewhere. I’d also never felt that the jolly time it brought was worth the price one’s body exacted upon it the next morning. Rather, I used to think it wasn’t worth it. When had that changed? Not when I was discharged, as she seemed to think. It was before that. Was it . . . no, it must have been Jane’s memorial when I’d started taking my drinking seriously. But she was half right; I hadn’t really started to hit the sauce hard until my discharge.

“Something like that,” I told her, half expecting a right hook in response. Or perhaps she’d opt for an uppercut. Then again she was only one step back from prime roundhouse kick territory. It was odd how I seemed to find such dark amusement in pondering her choice of attack. Not that I’d ever been good at anticipating her actions in the past.

But when no attack materialized I glanced curiously at her. It hadn’t even occurred to me that she might forgo rectification. But it turned out that in the end she hadn’t. She’d simply opted for a verbal assault. And by the end of her timed delivery all I could think was that a beating would have been preferable.

“I never would have expected this from you,” she said in a soft voice, almost as if she were talking to herself. The measured disappointment was worse than being punched by Hercules. It was as if she were holding up each aspect of my personality to a light, and finding each one wanting. And the worst part was how she paused after each statement as if expecting me to respond.

“You were always the civilian stuck in a military uniform,” she said, not exactly making it better. What was I supposed to say? Things change? Would that really have helped?

“You had all these plans and ideas for when you finished your tour. You carried this energy into everything you did,” she continued in what I considered a low blow. Who wants to be reminded of their own naiveté, of how they were before the universe smacked them in the nose?

“Drinking. Fighting,” she said, listing off my known character flaws. I couldn’t even decide if I should be offended at the disappointment dripping from her voice or agree with it.

“I couldn’t have even imagined you ending up like this,” she finished even quieter. Still I didn’t respond. I couldn’t even look at her.

“What the fuck happened to you?” she snapped, patience exhausted.

“That asshole Thompson is what happened,” I snapped back, again unthinkingly. After this was over my loose lips and I were going to have to have a long chat.

“Thompson?” she asked uncomprehendingly. “Who the hell is Thompson?”

“The dipshit head shrink they sent me to,” I yelled bitterly. I didn’t mean to yell, it just came out that way. And it kept coming out, no matter how hard I tried to stop myself. It was like trying to block a fire hose with a pillowcase. “He was the one who recommended my discharge. The idiot actually thought I had a death wish,” I told her, eyes beginning to sting. It was as if no time had passed. “Why couldn’t he have just left me alone? I was fine where I was. If it’s not broken don’t fix it,” I wound down lamely.

“What wasn’t broken?” she asked.

“Dammit, I was fine until that asshole came along,” I insisted. At some point in my tirade I’d collapsed against the wall behind me.

“No Tom,” Jane said, crouching down to my level. “You are most definitely *not* fine. Not then and clearly not now. Something happened to you. And you’ve been trying to ignore it with drink and fights and crazy risks. Now what happened?”

I shook my head, blinking back tears. I couldn’t speak even if I’d wanted to. My throat felt as if I’d swallowed a railroad spike. It was a wonder I could still breathe. And the rest of my body wasn’t much better off. My heart was pounding as if determined to explode out of my chest, and my arms were shaky and weak. I didn’t want to do this anymore, didn’t want to hear another word. Please stop, I begged silently.

And she might have even heard me, considering the medium of communication. But you’d never have been able to tell from her actions.

“What were you after Tom?” she demanded firmly. “Was it revenge?” she asked, getting another head shake for her trouble.

“Then what?” she snapped, clearly tired of my mime act. When I still didn’t respond she grabbed me by the simulated shirt and hauled me back to my feet with one arm. Damn but that woman was strong. “What the hell happened?” she yelled just inches from my face.

“Nothing,” I yelled back, finding my voice at last. “Nothing happened to me!”

“Oh, but something should have, is that it?” she yelled right back.

“No,” I said quickly, shying away from the very thought. After all, who wants to die?

“Okay, then what *shouldn’t* have happened?” she demanded, pinning me with that hazel gaze. I could tell from the look in her eyes that she was on the edge of unsticking some rotors, but my mind had gone blank. I couldn’t seem to grasp her lack of comprehension. I’d already told her what happened. What else was there to say?

Apparently that wasn’t enough as far as she was concerned because she grabbed me with both hands and bodily slammed me, back first, into the adjoining wall and held me there. I gasped as the air was reluctantly forced from my chest and pain from an old rib injury protested the sudden compression. I guess that answered the question of whether or not I could feel pain in a virtual environment. But, in retrospect, if they were designing this for games they’d want at least some feedback.

“I asked you a question Marine!” she growled right in my face, snapping me back to more pressing concerns. “Maybe I’m not your CO, but I can still kick your ass. Now what is it? What’s so damned hard for you to choke out?”

I couldn’t help but be impressed with the detail of this simulation. Everything was so real, so accurate. From the reminder of past cracked ribs to the smell of her breath, it was real. I found myself suddenly grateful for her fanaticism about oral hygiene.

“I’m still here, Tom!” she grated, lifting me off of the wall and slamming me back against it. “What the hell is your problem?” she all but yelled. “What shouldn’t have happened?”

“You shouldn’t have had to die!” I yelled back, suddenly wishing my lips came with a zipper. Not to mention a padlock.

She blinked at that, lowering my feet back to the deck. “You’re serious,” she said sounding confused. “You actually think I’m dead,” she added, watching me closely.

“Why else would we be here?” I asked indicating our alien environs.

She shrugged. “Bad practical joke, strange dream, a squid virtual environment designed to gather Intel; pick one.”

“I wish,” I assured her. Even if she were captive at least she’d be alive.

“So what; I’m a ghost?” she asked skeptically.

“More like an e-ghost,” I told her with a half shrug.

“And what the hell is an e-ghost?” she demanded, starting to lose patience with the conversation. I can’t say I blamed her. I’d probably get infuriated if someone kept insisting I was dead. It suddenly occurred to me that I was probably the first person to ever have to explain to someone that they’d shuffled off this mortal coil.

“It . . . well, it’s hard to explain,” I said finally.

“That never stopped you before,” she replied pointedly. “God, how many times did I wish you’d come with a mute button?”

“I wasn’t that bad,” I said uncertainly.

“Are you kidding?” she asked incredulously. “You’d drone on for hours at a time over whatever technical minutia had caught your eye at that moment. And it was always different. We had to learn to filter you out just keep from going insane.”

“Really?” I asked, genuinely surprised. Had I really been that bad?

“Well, it was that or weld your lips shut,” she said semi-seriously. “That was Mitchell’s suggestion.”

“That doesn’t really surprise me,” I commented. Mitchell was infamous for pranks that got out of control.

“Jackson wanted to break your jaw,” Jane went on.

“I see,” I replied uncertainly.

“If it makes you feel any better Harris suggested skipping that and just bribing a dentist to wire you shut.”

“How much-” I almost asked before my pride pointed out that I probably didn’t want to know what price could be placed upon my silence. “Never mind, I don’t want to know,” I told her.

“Simmons was all for gorilla gluing your teeth together,” she continued. Simmons always had been a low tech kind of guy.

“Jones probably had the most inventive idea,” Jane added. I was afraid to ask. “She wanted to transfer you to prisoner interrogation. She swore you could break any squid within twelve hours.”

“That doesn’t seem plausible,” I argued. We still had very little idea of Zrillahy psychology. All we really knew was that they were expansionistic and weren’t afraid to use biological warfare.

“She bet a month’s pay on it,” Jane countered.

“Alright, I get it,” I snapped. “I’m the most boring person on the planet. In a contest between me and a chainsaw the saw would beg for mercy. If talking were an Olympic sport I’d win medals after I was dead. If the human voice was ever classified a lethal weapon I’d have to register my mouth as a weapon of mass destruction.”

“I see you’ve been down this road before,” Jane commented dryly.

“You may have noticed I have a tendency to run off at the mouth,” I replied in matching tone.

“Except now,” she pointed out seriously.

I sighed, again; defeated, again. “Some Indian guy, name’s Mahat or something, figured out a way to create an emulated psyche by scanning a person’s brain,” I explained. “In this case, your brain.”

“I thought you said I was dead,” she prompted.

I shrugged. “You’re body hadn’t cleared bio so it was still in frozen quarantine,” I told her. “Apparently he’s managed to account for minor necrosis of the brain tissue.”

“I see,” she replied slowly. I could tell she was still trying to decide whether to believe me. She was looking around the room as if trying to see the seams. I could only imagine what my reaction would be in her place. Denial, denial, and more denial, as a start. And I’d probably segway back into that state at some point in the name of consistency.

“Tom,” she said finally, right on cue “I’m not dead.” How I wished that were true. I’d have given anything to make it true. I’d have switched places with her in half a heartbeat if I could.

But whatever the two of us might have wished it just wasn’t so. “What’s the last thing you remember?” I asked her.

She blinked at that unexpected question before her eyes turned inwards. “We were on a mission,” she started slowly, as if looking for the words. “You thought you’d figured out how to interface with the squid’s systems . . .” she said before trailing off. Then those razor sharp eyes of hers refocused back on me. “Something went wrong,” she stated.

Before I could respond the ghostly visage of five marines (okay, four marines and their tagalong tech) barreled through the door at the end of the room. The last two through stopped to use the door for cover as they fired back the way they’d come. The other three seemed to be engaged in an argument.

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“Wait,” Sarah said as the memory of the team intruded on the room in the holo “what’s happening here?”

“I can’t be sure until I look at the code,” Mahesh replied slowly “but it appears that the software is having trouble separating Jane’s emulator’s behavior with her memories.”

“How could that be?” Gibbons asked curiously.

“We may have opened the parameters for the environment too much,” came the reply.

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I couldn’t help but stare as this event unfolded a second time. I don’t know why I couldn’t look away. I knew what would be said. I knew how it would end. I knew I couldn’t change any of it. But, still I watched. Besides me Jane stood motionless. I couldn’t tell if she was seeing it or remembering it. Either way neither of us moved or spoke until it was over.

“I’m guessing that subroutine wasn’t a diagnostic protocol after all,” Mitchell’s ghost said from the cover of the doorway.

“It must have been a security routine,” my ghost replied from the center of the room. “I can’t explain why I didn’t recognize it. There’s still a lot we don’t know about their coding scheme and architecture.”

“But you were able to interface,” Jane’s ghost asked. Or should that be Jane’s Ghost’s Ghost?

“Yep,” my ghost said a little too smug for my taste. “Everything I got is on my tablet.”

“Alright-” Jane’s ghost started before being rudely interrupted by gunfire. “Alright, we have to make sure that info gets out. O’Brian, on the way down you said that this console,” she said nodding at the terminal “controls the lift right?”

“Right,” my ghost replied, still oblivious to what she was planning. Damn I was naïve.

“Jones,” her ghost said turning to the third person in the group, “give me the charge.” They both twitched and stared at her. It was such a simple statement, almost innocent in its nature. But it carried more weight than their destroyer. A moment later Jones reached back and unstrapped the demo charge she was carrying, handing it over.

“Wait,” my ghost protested, finally catching on “why not just set it on a timer and leave it behind?”

Jane shook her head. “They might disable it. And even if they didn’t, the explosion could damage the lift. We have to make sure your data gets back to the fleet.”

“I’ll do it,” Martinez volunteered from his place at the door.

“Screw that,” my ghost cut in. “I’m the one who screwed up; it should be me.”

“Dammit,” Jones grated “you’re the one person that can’t stay.”

“Just take my computer,” my ghost argued. “It’s all there.”

“I don’t recall asking for volunteers,” Jane replied dryly. “And this isn’t a poll,” she added, forestalling another objection from my ghost. “I’m the best at this kind of shit. I’ve got the job.” And it was true; when it came to that kind of fighting Jane was the best I’d ever seen. She was downright scary. But that didn’t mean she was *right* god damn it.

“I can do it,” my ghost insisted, all but begging.

But all she said was “You have your orders Marine,” like that made everything okay. Like that was all it took. “Martinez, Mitchell,” she added turning to the two at the door “set proximity mines in the hall and get the hell out of here. You’ve got two minutes,” she added, fiddling with the timer on the charge. Martinez and Mitchell pulled a couple of thick discs out of their packs and flipped them down the hall like Frisbees before joining the rest of them. Meanwhile Jones was activating the lift from the console.

“But Lieutenant-” my ghost persisted before her legendary temper flared. Her ghost turned, unleashing a left hook so fast I couldn’t see it, even when I knew what to look for. I suddenly realized just how much she used to lay off in our sparring sessions.

The force of the blow staggered my ghost into Mitchell’s, who easily caught its unconscious form. “Get him out of here,” was all she said before tossing the charge behind the console. Martinez and Mitchell both stared at her for a moment, as if weighing the repercussions of arguing further. Then, as one, they drag/carried my ghost’s unconscious body to the lift. Jones pulled it closed and it started up to the top level of this subterranean base. Then her ghost stalked over to their ingress door and waited.

Not that she had to wait long. She’d barely taken position behind the left firebreak when a pair of explosions announced the Zrillahy cavalry’s arrival.

I shuddered involuntarily as they charged past her and into the room. The green tinted light only accentuated the mottled coloring of their oily skin. They only came up to the neck on most humans yet weighed almost as much. They were designated as semi-vertebrates (something the biologists dreamed up just for them; they must have spent all of twenty seconds on it) which basically meant they had tentacles for limbs. It gave them an odd rolling gate.

I tried not to watch; I knew what was coming. I knew how it would end. But I couldn’t take my eyes off of the scene unfolding before me as an entire squad streamed past her unnoticed form. As the last one cleared the door her avatar stepped out from her niche and opened up on them. I flinched as the little flechettes tore through them straight to where we were standing, but nothing happened.

Her ghost then moved back to the door just as answering fire from the hallway made a vain attempt to avenge the massacred squids. Jane’s response was to grab a plasma grenade from her vest. Ripping the pin out with her teeth (an act I don’t recommend for anyone attempting to retain said teeth) she bounced it off of the wall just past the door and down the hall. There was a muffled scree of surprise followed by a gout of flame that penetrated the door before falling back into it.

Her ghost was right on the heels of that retreating flame, whirling to fire down the corridor. My eyes began to burn again as I watched her hopeless battle. It didn’t matter how good she was; without a means of escape she was doomed. Some lucky squid was bound to get her.

As if that very thought was some sort of signal, she took a hit in the leg. She fell against the left side of the door itself, propping herself on it. But she never stopped firing. Even after being hit in the right shoulder and falling to the ground, she simply switched her rifle to the left shoulder and continued on and on and *on* until the room was filled with a brilliant flash that seemed to reset it.

 Jane stood there frozen for another second, as if processing what she’d just seen/remembered. I didn’t even pretend to know what she was going through. I thought about saying . . . something, but what? I thought about touching her, but didn’t dare; I realized quite suddenly that I was at this moment more afraid of her than I’d ever been. I couldn’t explain it. All I knew was that I was afraid . . . and it wasn’t her right hook that had me paralyzed. Then she turned back to me, eyes visibly hardening as they met mine.

“You son of a bitch,” she bit out angrily. Before I could respond she unleashed a bone shattering right hook to my jaw. The blow slammed my head back into the wall behind me and I slumped to the floor.

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“Turn it off,” Sarah almost whispered as the Lieutenant’s blow connected. This was all of her worst nightmares (well, those that didn’t leave her patient comatose anyway) come true. “Turn it off now.”

“You can’t,” Mahesh objected. There might have been more but Sarah cut him off.

“You got your human trial-” she started, only to be interrupted in kind.

“He’s right Sarah,” Frank cut in. “This may or may not have been a damned fool idea,” he continued “but the absolute worst thing you could do is strand him in this moment. If you do he’ll never leave it.”

“She hates him,” Sarah replied uncomprehendingly.

“Even that could at least give him closure,” Gibbons replied. “And perhaps, if she hates him he can stop hating himself.”

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“How dare you piss on me like this?” Jane continued with a voice that dripped venom.

“I’m sorry,” I sobbed from where I’d fallen. What else was there to say? And even if there was, that railroad spike had returned; only now it felt as if it had been lodged in my throat sideways. I didn’t blame her for how she felt. Deep down I guess I’d always known this was how she’d react.

“You’re sorry?” she asked, sounding incredulous. “If you were sorry we wouldn’t be here you selfish shit!” she bellowed. I could feel her hands flexing into fists at her sides. But instead of another blow she grabbed me by the throat, lifted me back up and slammed me into the wall. “The only person you’re feeling sorry for is yourself,” she hissed with her face only inches from mine.

“Should I be happy I killed you then?” I croaked, lurching back to my feet angrily.

“You didn’t kill me you self centered prick!” she exploded. “The demo charge killed me. The squids killed me. The war killed me.”

“Only because I fucked up,” I protested. “If I’d known, if I’d only seen that it wasn’t a diagnostic . . . if I’d only done my job you wouldn’t have had to stay behind,” I choked out.

“Ah, and so we’ll add arrogant and stupid to your list of character flaws,” she replied tightly.

“What the hell does that mean?” I asked defensively. Probably more defensively than I deserved, but then I’d always been a bit too proud of my intellect. She’d played that card on me many times and I always fell for it. Why not once more?

“It means,” she replied in a clipped voice “that expecting yourself to make *zero* mistakes the first time *anyone* managed to interface with alien tech has got to be the stupidest most arrogant attitude I’ve ever heard of. Hell, if you’d have nailed the interface the first time off I’d have had to start going to church again; it would have been clear indication that not only was there a God, but he was on our side.”

“It should have been me,” my mouth protested. “It was my mistake,” I added.

“Strike that,” she replied acidly. “That is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Why?” I demanded. “Why did it have to be you,” I almost yelled, suddenly very angry. “Why should you pay for my mistakes?”

“Setting aside the fact that you couldn’t have held them off,” she started “did it ever occur to you that you were the one person we couldn’t afford to lose?”

“What do you mean I couldn’t have held them off?” I demanded, unsure if I should have felt insulted or not.

“Tom,” she said placatingly “don’t get me wrong. You’re a good soldier. You’d have never lasted on my team if you weren’t. But you were never a Raider. And face it,” she added “you were never placed with us to be a Raider. You were there to be something more; to do something we couldn’t.”

“Be babysat?” I replied with a little of her acidic tone, remembering those first few weeks. The hazing had been real. I’d expected that, being that I hadn’t gone through the crap they had in order to wear the bloody cutlass patch. It had gotten better after our first mission though.

“You still don’t get it,” Jane replied exasperatedly. “The reason we were so hard on you wasn’t because we felt like you’d cheated your way amongst us. It was because we’d grasped, instinctively, something that your overly intelligent dumb ass couldn’t seem to register.”

“And what was that?” I failed to keep myself from asking.

“That you were more important to the war effort than all of us combined; that the skills that eventually enabled you to interface with alien tech had to be protected at all costs. I can’t say any of us liked that knowledge, but we understood it.”

“If I was so fucking important then why was I discharged?” I asked bitterly.

“Why the fuck were you even still in the military?” she asked in a blast of frustration just shy of explosive.

“Oh, so suddenly I’m not allowed to serve humanity?” I asked pointedly.

“Don’t try that bullshit with me,” she hissed. “If you’d given even half a shit about the course of this war you’d have been home with your family working on that pocket laser, or those load bearing magnetic bearings, or any number of other ideas you used to bore the shit out of us with.” It was a nice thought, but should it have contained any truth at all I’d never have been assigned to Jane’s squad in the first place. How could I have been needed and not needed at the same time?

“Well then, I guess you didn’t need me after all,” I told her, trying to make her see the dichotomy of her arguments.

“We. Did,” she replied through gritted teeth. “There were only a handful of people who could do what you did. But there were millions that could have taken over once you did it. We needed you applying the knowledge you’d gained us, not killing squids one slimy tentacle at a time. So why the fuck were you hanging around like my kid brother?”

I started to tell her, only to realize that I really wasn’t sure anymore. I guess she might have had a point, blunt though it may have been. I guess I’d never really questioned my need to be on the front lines, I’d simply known I belonged there. But why? “Maybe I was trying to honor your memory,” I hedged finally.

She blinked in surprise at that a fraction of a second before sending her right fist rocketing through my solar plexus. I fell back to the deck, landing on hands and knees, reflecting upon the strange twist of fate that saved me from a concussion but not from the demanding nausea her strike had caused.

“*Horseshit*,” Jane whispered from directly above. If words could have colors that would have been white hot. I never have figured out why horseshit was always worse than bullshit in her book, but its use was the surest indicator of just how pissed she was. “You weren’t honoring me you spoiled little brat,” she continued. “You may have been punishing yourself. You may even have been trying to get yourself killed in some childish idea of repentance. But you certainly weren’t honoring me.”

“What was I supposed to do?” I growled up at her, suddenly angrier than I’d ever been. “Was I supposed to celebrate? Do a little dance? Have a party? Piss on your grave?” I demanded. “Why the fuck couldn’t you have just listened to me?” I continued desperately. “It was my mistake. I should have paid for it. But instead I caused your death. I murdered you. I deserve to die,” I croaked out at last.

“All those brains and you still don’t get it,” she commented, sounding surprised.

“Get what?” I asked pitifully.

“That’s not your life your living,” she replied, dead seriously.

“How funny then,” I replied “that everyone keeps bleating about how I shouldn’t waste *my* life.”

“You’re not, you’re wasting *mine*,” she said, emphasizing that last.

“Did that already,” I muttered, wondering if our tenses were getting confused. I’d wasted her life over a year ago, not that she’d see it so. She hadn’t even remembered dying until a couple of minutes ago.

“That remains to be seen,” she replied darkly.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“It means,” she said as if explaining it to a small child “that whether or not my life was wasted is dependent upon the result. It can only be wasted if it isn’t worth the product it paid for. So, what have you done with the time I purchased for you?”

It was my turn to blink in surprise. I’d always been taught that a person’s life was precious and irreplaceable, and of inestimable value. It was wrong to think of them as marks on some ledger. It couldn’t be the same as walking into a clothier and trading a hundred creds for a leather jacket . . . could it? Or was that simply the best that could be hoped for?

And if she was right, what did that say about me? In answer my mind insisted (against my better judgment) on cataloguing all that I hadn’t accomplished since. Every missed opportunity, every drunken bout, every single fight with my wife was floating there with the power of memory.

It wasn’t exactly a new list, but now it wasn’t alone. Because against that list was Jane’s final act, and I could see that she’d been cheated. I’d cheated her. And for the first time in over a year I felt something other than the pity that had become so much my constant companion that I’d forgotten its presence; shame.

But that didn’t change the fact that she was basically telling me to live it up on her tab. And no matter how you dressed it up, profiting from someone else’s suffering was wrong. Nothing could change that.

“I just don’t know what else to do,” I confessed hopelessly, as the tears came again. “I can’t profit from your death. I can’t.”

“Oh,” she asked, sounding almost amused. “You’d prefer a two for one special instead?”

“A what?” I asked uncomprehendingly. Something told me she wasn’t talking about the weekly deal at McDonald’s.

“A two for one special you selfish prick,” she bit out. “Two lives destroyed for only one body; very economical for the squids. Not so much for humanity.”

“But then, you wouldn’t have to deal with this guilt anymore would you?” she continued softly when I didn’t respond. “That’s what you’ve been after isn’t it?” she asked, crouching down to my level. I nodded, feeling the truth in the confirmation, but unable to look at her.

“You know,” she said almost to herself “I’ve always wondered who actually got the cleft end of the stick in these situations.” I looked a question at her, unable to speak again. It felt as if I’d gotten an entire locomotive jammed in my throat now. My eyes felt as if they contained an ocean each. My breaths came in short, ragged gasps. And everything she said felt as if Hephaestus himself were hammering upon my soul.

“I died,” she explained to my questioning look. “But you’re the one that has to live with it.” I shook my head at that; not so much in disagreement, but in appreciation of the irony of having a dead person pity me.

“Tom,” she added, grabbing my chin and forcing me to look at her “you know there is no amount of punishment that will change what’s happened. You can’t buy my life back. All you can do is make it worth something. You’re the only one that can.”

Then she released my hand and stood up. “Get your shit together Marine,” she said, reverting to her natural gruff tones “or I’ll haunt you until the day you die.” With that she headed for the lift.

“How?” I pleaded as she reached her destination.

“You don’t need me to tell you that,” she replied without turning around. Then she stepped into the alcove. Suddenly everything went black and the words ‘Simulation Ended’ floated in the center of my vision.

I couldn’t help but shake my head and grin despite how I felt. Jane’s favorite conversational gambit had always been the Parthian Shot.

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“Hi Jane,” I said, squinting into the waning light of the autumn sun “sorry I didn’t come sooner.” She didn’t respond, but then, I’d have been terrified if she had. I shivered slightly, despite my attire, as a gust of cool wind brushed past me. It was the first time I’d worn my class A’s as a civilian. It felt . . . heavy. But it was appropriate.

I let my gaze wander over the marble headstone. I’d commissioned it eighteen months ago, but this was my first time actually seeing it. It wasn’t flashy or ornate. I figured Jane would have climbed out of her grave and kicked my ass again if I’d saddled her with something so maudlin. And believe me, once is more than enough times to have had your ass kicked by a dead person.

The stone had all of the usual information on it: names, dates, rank, etc. But the inscription at the bottom simply said:

*Def. Hero - One who fights so others might succeed.*

I figured the good folks at Merriam Webster’s Dictionary would probably object to that; screw 'em.

“I finished development on that artificial muscle I’m sure I bored you with,” I told her. “I’m sure you tuned out the details,” I added with a grin. “The patent only came in last week and I’ve already received over a dozen proposals for its use.”

The Department of Defense was naturally interested in its use for robotic armor; I’d already done some of the ground work there. But it turned out that everyone wanted a piece of it. Aerospace already had some delusion of replacing all airplane hydraulics overnight; they always did think limitless, as well as budgetless. Even the adult recreation industry wanted in. They were calling their brainchild of my brainchild Sex-Droids, if you could believe it. That proposal had provided me quite a bit of amusement, but they’d actually had some good points about the effects on the illegal sex trade. The wonders of man never ceased, it seemed.

The momentary amusement attached to that memory faded as the reality of my local intruded on my thoughts. I searched for something else to say, something to tell her. There was so much, and so much of it unnecessary. But it pithy to waste an entire trip on three sentences.

“I met your folks,” I told her, grinning at the memory. “It seemed right to tell them about you in person,” I added as if needing an excuse. “They were amazing. I told them everything that happened; what you did, what I’d become. And they looked me dead in the eyes and told me to grow up. And there was I thinking I’d finished doing that a long time ago. But maybe that’s a task no one ever really completes,” I added, thinking about the journey of these last years.

“It hasn’t been easy, Jane,” I admitted softly. “I never realized just how much comfort I’d found in my misery, how much I’d come to see it as evidence I was being punished. But I’ve tried to honor your wishes. I can’t say as to how well I’ve done. Perhaps one day you’ll tell me.” It would hopefully be a while. Of course reactivating the neural emulator was out of the question. For one thing, Jane’s body had been interred here for almost a year, and for another Doctor Johnson had been adamant that I shouldn’t go back in, for fear of getting reality and simulation confused or some such. She was a worrier like that.

I turned to the sounds of the good doctor’s approaching footsteps. I swear that woman could read thoughts. “She was a hell of a woman,” Sarah said running her hand over the headstone as she circled it.

“Yes, she was,” I agreed.

 She stopped opposite me. “I think it’s time we closed your file,” she said watching me in that way she had.

I frowned. “What do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean you don’t need me to hold your hands anymore,” she replied with a grin that removed most of the bite from the statement. Then she cocked her head slightly and said “I guess you never really did. You just needed the swift kick in the ass your Lieutenant administered so expertly.”

I grinned. “She was a pro,” I admitted. “I can’t say it was an enjoyable experience,” I told her “but do you think you could thank Doctor Dhat for making it possible?”

“I’m sure he’d like to hear about how his test case fares,” she replied. “From what I’ve heard he’s had a dozen more similar requests.”

“It's amazing how people seem to insist on finding unexpected uses for new technology isn’t it?” I asked her with a mischievous grin. I’d shared some of the more raunchy applications of my own work with her.

“Yes it is,” she agreed with a grin of her own before turning back to her car.

“And Doctor?” I said, stopping her mid-turn.

“Yes?’ she inquired, one eyebrow raised.

“Jane may have booted me onto the right path,” I told her “but you helped me navigate it. Thank you.”

“It’s a funny thing,” she responded with a quirky grin. “The more I practice this profession the more I’ve come to realize that I don’t really help people. I simply help them help themselves. I think she’d be proud,” she added, offering her hand.

“I’ve only begun,” I assured her, taking the proffered hand. “You know we’re meeting the Scotts at The Cutting Board tonight right?” I asked.

“Yes, why?” she replied with a slightly furrowed brow.

“I think they’d like to meet you.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think that’s appropriate,” she said hesitantly.

“Now that excuse might have worked if I were your patient,” I teased. “Now you’re just a friend of the family, and it would be rude to refuse. Besides,” I added seriously “it seems right for everyone that’s helped me through the last two years be there.”

She thought about that for a second (I could almost hear her stomach and taste buds ganging up on her in fanatical favor of the five star restaurant’s menu) before nodding. “Alright,” she said, admitting defeat “what time?”

“We’re heading over now,” I told her as we started back to the car. Angela and Madison were waiting there at a respectful distance.

“Will you have trouble changing the reservation so late?” Sarah asked.

“Fortunately, I took your weak will into account when I made it,” I joked, earning a laugh. “So the only question is what to order, right Madison?” I said bringing my five year old into the conversation.

“I’m getting tator tots!” she exclaimed, jumping up and down excitedly as we continued to the cars.