



**Excision**  
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Neema checked the link at her wrist again; the account still blinked empty. She twitched her sleeve down and her glove up to cover the flash of skin and glanced along the tiled hallway of the Zommart. She knew she shouldn't linger, but the layers of smell in the hall - the sick-sweet base cocktailed from vomit, blood, and shit, the chemical overlay of the cleaning fluids, the perfume pumped into the recycled air meant to disguise it all - always froze her when she first walked in. What was worse, the smell, or that it reminded her of Zana's room?

At the thought of her sister, Neema squared her shoulders. *Just one more, Zana. Just one more.* Between the clusters of suited men and bright-robed women examining the merchandise, a blue uniform snagged her attention. Still swallowing heavily, she immediately moved towards the cheaper Zoms, examining each sales tag as she passed. *Not loitering, officer - shopping.*

Her movement attracted the Blue's eye; it was a novice's mistake and she should have known better. She might have pretended she did not hear his call to stop amid the thrum of the Zommart; she might have lost herself in the jostle and slipped away through an unregarded sidedoor. But to do so would be to abandon the Zom she had come to rescue from his sentence, and to abandon the doctor, whose work must succeed.

Her credentials were in order. Neema focused on this thought as she turned back to face the officer. She was glad of the veil which covered all of her face and neck except her eyes, for without it, he would surely see the fear etched into the lines of her face. Even with the veil hiding her, she was sure he would make out the puff of the cloth over her mouth as her breath panted out of her. She slowed her breathing and relaxed her eyes. *My credentials are in order.*

He was brusque, his gaze taking her in from covered head to booted toe. 'Code?'

Neema gave it, keeping her voice low and her eyes downcast, but he thrust a finger towards her left hand, which she only now realised was clenched into a fist. She wiped her palm against her robe and raised her arm, holding it out to the Blue. She eased back the sleeve of her robe with her other hand. When she reached the top of her glove, she tugged it up so the cuff hugged the edge of her wrist-link. Then she inched her sleeve up again until it sat against the other edge of the metal band.

Not a sliver of skin was visible to the Blue; if it was, he might very well Tag her for Incitement. That might get her Zommed if she was unlucky or on multiple offences. If he decided she'd shown him skin on purpose, he could Tag her with the full charge, Incitement to Rape, and she would

certainly end up on the wrong side of the Zommart. Would the doctor find himself a new volunteer to come and buy her? Her loose robe hid her shudder; she kept her eyes relaxed and guileless.

Her caution seemed to have irritated the Blue. He rapped at her wrist-link hard enough to knock her arm aside, but it beeped to verify the code she had given verbally. He grunted and tapped it into his own wrist-link, a sleek silver band which even had a holographic inset.

'You're from below?' He didn't need to see her record to know that; her robe was as dull as dirt amid the peacock shades of the women swirling about them with their sideways glances. Besides, she wore the face veil on top of the robe and head covering, which richer women did not need to do.

'My family is, officer,' Neema said. 'I have a sponsor and permission to move above.' The sponsor was one of the doctor's aliases; that alias employed a gardener, another alias, who was Neema's husband in the records.

The Blue was intent on the information scrolling off the screen. His reply was almost absent-minded. 'Those kinds of documents can be faked.'

Neema's heart tried to choke her before she understood the slyness behind the comment. The doctor had invited her to create a rich husband for herself, to discard the drab robe of the servant underclass. But she had, for a change, been cleverer than him. Her accent and way of moving would have broadcast the falseness of any rich covering, caused the Blue to look deeper, perhaps tear the tissues of the counterfeit documents protecting her. But who would spend minbi to create a servant's life for themselves? Her credentials were in order.

Instead of the guilt the Blue was trying to scare from her, she offered him meekness. 'Please, officer, the boss will be angry with me if I do not return soon.'

Was that not the absolute truth? The Blue, watching her from over his wrist-link, tapped in a few more commands - perhaps he was verifying that she really did have access to her sponsor's funds to be running such an expensive errand for him - but the doctor was always thorough. The Blue couldn't catch her out; he nodded once and merged back into the crowd.

Neema wanted to sink to the floor in relief. She did not dare even sigh before turning back to her pretence at browsing, moving without urgency but in the opposite direction to the Blue. She could distantly hear the chants of the protestors lining the front walkway. She had hurried

through them earlier, head down, head covering twitched forward to blinker her eyes. She had had to clench her teeth hard to stop herself from defending herself, from telling them she was on their side.

It would have done nothing but attract their attention, when she had been invisible and irrelevant to them in her mud-coloured robe and behind the veil. Even they, who risked Tagging by being out there, fighting so hard for the Zoms, could let their eyes pass over someone like her, invisible in their mind and therefore to their gaze.

She was jolted from her musings when a Reg code she recognised came under her eye. This was the one she'd come to claim - a touch to the wrist-link confirmed it. What was it doing down here, at the cheap end of the Zommart? It was long-haired and beefy, with muscles gleaming in its arms and legs; the seller had left it near-naked and oiled it. Neema averted her eyes from its body and examined its face. A double-scar jagged across its forehead.

Neema watched an older woman as she assessed it and a second Zom standing just behind it. The brightness of her robe, her unveiled face, the lock of greying hair escaping the head covering and the handkerchief she pressed to her mouth and nose suggested she was new to the Zommart, and lost: a woman of her wealth and standing should be at the front where the exclusive stock was displayed. Perhaps she thought she was being daring by risking this end of the hall. Neema hoped she wouldn't have to get into a bidding war with her.

That thought made her check her link. The funds still hadn't come through. What had gone wrong? Had the Zom's wife backed out, or had the doctor finally been caught? Was that why the Blue was patrolling the hall so zealously? Should she use her last minbi to escape back to the sub-city, or could she trust that all was well and use the doctor's own funds to buy this Zom on the logic that he didn't care overly much what he was experimenting on and it was unreasonably cheap at 1100 minbi?

The woman had fallen into discussion with the seller. 'Look, lady,' he said, pulling back his sleeve and thrusting his arm beneath the nose of his wares. 'Certified non-biters.' Moon-crescent scars, stark on his tanned arm, showed his gambit sometimes paid poor dividends, but on this occasion he was safe: the big Zom stared straight ahead, face slack, eyes as docile as a factory-cow's. The woman reached up and put a gloved hand about the muscles of the Zom's forearm. Neema tensed. *The other one, there's nothing wrong with the other one.*

'Oh, yes, he's a strong one, healthy and house-trained. A bargain, lady.'

'He must be a multiple offender, to be back here,' said the woman. 'What'd he do?'

The seller hesitated and Neema watched his eyes dart from side to side. But there was no point lying or trying to avoid the question: the Zom's Reg was printed on its sale tag, and a simple check on the link would give the woman his history. 'Just the one conviction, lady.' Again, he paused, but he had no choice. 'Rape.'

The woman snatched her hand away. Her face had gone hard and squinted as she jerked back and hurried off. 'Bargain at twice the price,' called the seller after her.

He gave up and turned away, but Neema kept watching her as she hurried to safety of the front of the hall. She paused only once, to strip off her gloves and toss them to the ground. The bare hands, before she pulled on clean gloves from her handbag, were a flagrant Incitement, but none of the other customers noted it, just as they did not pause at the hair she let show at her forehead or the nose, lips and neck she left as bare as her eyes. If Neema had done the same -

'Two for the price of one,' muttered the seller. Neema looked back at him. 'Rapist and murderer.' The seller flicked a forefinger against each of the two Zoms' bare arms in turn and tapped his foot. His gaze fell on Neema.

'What do you want, sub-rat?' he demanded.

Neema shook her head and started to walk off. Did the protestors gather against all law to march and chant for a rapist? Had she risked her own freedom repeatedly to help the doctor find a cure for a rapist? Had her sister deserved the same punishment as a *rapist*? The familiar beep from her wrist-link stopped her. The funds had finally come in; the wife of this Zom had made the deposit and it had arrived via multiple screens into the doctor's account.

10,000 minbi, magnitudes more than was needed to make the purchase and pay other costs. Could the wife possibly not know what her erstwhile husband had been convicted of? Or was she utterly ignorant of how the Zom prices were determined - not by health or size, but, inversely, by how terrible their crime was? Either way, her generosity bought the doctor resources, equipment and time, and Neema could not turn that down on his behalf. Besides, this one would die under the laser just like all the rest the doctor had tried and failed to fix, and deserve it more than most.

She turned back to the seller. 'Bargain at half the price, maybe?' she asked, trying to minimise her accent.

It took 750 minbi. Neema gave her code, and waited while the seller checked for her permission to purchase, supplied by the same alias that sponsored her, and for any prior association with the Zom when it had been human. One mark in the system's favour: it might refuse the mercy of allowing friends or family to buy back a Zom, but it also barred enemies from the same - otherwise, what might the woman the man had raped have done to the Zom who was now, legally, not that man? Neema, of course, came up clear of any previous connection and the purchase was allowed.

Once she'd effected the transfer, the trader peeled the red dot from the back of his hand, passed it in front of the eyes of the Zom, who followed it in transfexion, and placed it on Neema's. She pulled her glove back up to hide the skin, rubbing away the feel of the man's fingers.

She walked back through the hall. The Zom shambled along behind, responding like an animal to the scent of the red dot she now wore on the back of her hand. It had been well-conditioned to associate that scent with food; every Zom was conditioned to a different scent, or who knew how many she would end up leading home?

The hall had become more crowded; a commotion of whistles and sirens suggested the protestors were being cleared to allow the shoppers to attend to their business in peace. Neema squeezed past two teenagers prodding over a young female Zom - unlike human women, they didn't wear the robe and head covering - and putting their heads together to discuss prices. The boys shoved back, beginning to heckle her, but the Zom looming up behind her dissuaded them.

Outside, Neema steeled herself. This was the part she hated: the ride back to the doctor's house by rail, crammed into the Mass-Transport with the Zom at her side. She did not know which was worse, the newly-acquired Zom pressed up against her by the crush of passengers, or the blank eyes of those passengers, who refused to notice her or the Zom she had purchased. Why did they not challenge her? Why did they not demand to know how she could buy another human for her service? The answer was simple: it was not because they all had Zoms at home and knew to think of them as inhuman. It was because she in her servant's robe and veil and the Zom in its dun uniform could be seen by the eye but not noticed by the mind. Their identities had been wiped from them.

It should have made her sympathise with her latest purchase. But abruptly the thought of being pressed against his bare skin in the Mass-Transport repulsed her. She could tell herself the Zom was not the man

and still not be convinced - after all, didn't she work for the doctor on the sole promise that one day a Zom could be returned to human?

A private car, heavily tinted and armoured, shot past. The window buzzed down as it passed and a junk-can was flung out at them with a cry of 'Look, a pair of stupids!' She retrieved the can - even the minimal metal in it was worth a minbi or two - and looked wistfully after the car. But if she wouldn't use the Mass-Transport, she had only one option. They walked. She hurried along with her head down, her head covering pulled forward so that not a strand of hair could slip free, and the Zom trailed behind, shuffling, rocking from side to side, letting out intermittent moans, perhaps tormented by the scent it followed.

The street of the doctor's house was undisturbed. Neema, out of ingrained habit, scanned for Blue surveillance before she led the Zom around to the back of the house. It was a rich man's house: two-storey, painted wood, trellis and porch. It was part of the doctor's cover.

As soon as she got the kitchen door open and led the Zom inside, the wife was on him, embracing him, stroking his face, exclaiming over the scar across his temples. 'Michael, Michael,' she kept calling, becoming increasingly distressed as the Zom showed no response.

'M. Lalleh,' said Neema, removing her face veil. They had warned her and warned her; it was just lucky for her the Zom really was a non-biter. 'It's not Michael, it's not your husband. Please sit down.'

The other woman would not release the Zom, which was now drooling and rolling its head about on its neck. Neema seized her arm, so hard that she was sure her fingernails were digging into Lalleh's skin through the cloth of her scarlet robe and Neema's own gloves. 'If you will not stop unsettling it, we cannot complete the operation.'

Lalleh stared at her. No one would dare speak to her so in her real life, Neema imagined, no one would dare lay hands on her, except perhaps the husband the Zom had once been. She swallowed and backed away, tears streaking the dusky oval of her face, hands tearing at each other. She stared at the Zom hungrily. Neema knew that look; Lalleh was still trying to see her husband in the slack, unresponsive face of the Zom slouching opposite her.

'Can you - can you help him?' she asked at last, in a dry whisper.

Neema quelled the welling of pity, the impulse to say, *of course*. 'It's very risky,' she said, in the same authoritative voice she had adopted to force the woman away from the Zom. They'd gone over this before. 'Remember we warned you, there's a very real chance that it will die.'

The woman put one hand out towards the Zom and returned it to her lap. She was a small thing, with a beautiful face disembodied by her bright robe and head covering. She looked frail. But her words were fierce. 'Anything's better than this.'

'You have to understand,' went on Neema. She had made this speech so many times it had almost become easy. 'Even if we succeed. Even if the process brings back a measure of sentience - it will not be the man you knew. Memory, language, personality, all will remain impaired. We cannot return your husband to you.'

Lalleh was crying properly now, making no attempt to stop or disguise her anguish. 'I just want him to recognise me,' she got out between sobs.

*And who did he rape? Would he recognise her?* But Neema, even wearing her cold, rational persona, could not ask it. She laid a hand on the other woman's shoulder, and led the Zom downstairs to the lab.

The doctor was waiting inside the concreted room. 'What took so long?' he demanded in his rapid, shrill voice. But he did not want an answer; he was already herding the new acquisition to the table. He had to prod it a few times to get it to lie down. It lay passively as he buckled its arms into the waiting wrist-strips.

As usual, the smell in the room took Neema's breath away. She swallowed heavily to acclimatise herself; it was not as bad as the Zommart. 'He was Zommed for rape, you know,' she said. The doctor tightened leather straps about the Zom's chest. 'Is that the type you think deserves a second chance?'

'If that's the type that's paid for,' said the doctor as he tied down its legs. 'That's the type that goes on the table.' He did not look at her.

*That's the type I think deserves to die.* But Neema didn't say it aloud. While the doctor scrubbed and dried his hands, she went behind the bank of monitors and stripped off her robe and head covering. It was hot in the lab, and the draping cloth got in her way when she was assisting the surgery. Months had passed before she had felt comfortable and safe enough with the doctor to even remove the veil and gloves to let him see her face and hands, let alone to remove her outer robe and show her hair and arms as well. But the doctor was unlike anyone she'd ever met: he worked on the Zoms not because he was a dissenter who thought their fate violated human rights, but for the sheer challenge of it. And Neema remained invisible to him even when she took off her swathing and revealed herself.

The doctor hooked in the heart and brain monitors, then snatched up his laser and pulled the light closer. 'Double-scar,' he muttered. 'They made very sure of this one.' He made the first incision, peeling back the scalp and hair to look at the brain. The Zom opened its mouth and started a continuous droning, but otherwise did not flinch or react to its head being opened up again. The original surgery, which had eradicated its frontal lobe and other vital bits of its brain, would have also destroyed much of the pain receptors in its scalp. The brain itself was insensate.

This one would have made a good labourer, thought Neema as she waited by the doctor's side. Maybe a bodyguard, depending on how well it responded to shaping and conditioning. The petty criminals she was normally paid to rescue were half-starved things, but this one, as the seller had pointed out, was strong.

'Extracted scar tissue,' muttered the doctor. His eyes were watering behind his spectacles as he peered into the razed mass of the brain, but his hands were steady. Neema silently handed him his next tool, a stainless steel instrument that looked to her like tweezers. He laid the tools out in the order he wanted them; he did not teach her the names of them.

'Re-linked the hemispheres,' he announced. Neema picked up the syringe. To her, it looked as if it was full of crude oil, but this stuff was worth even more than that, according to the doctor. He took the syringe from her and plunged the needle into the brain. The sludge oozed out and dissolved into the grey hemispheres. Neema looked away.

'Deployed Nan-tech. Closing.'

That was the best he could do; repair the most dramatic damage, slice out the rest, and give the surviving brain a concentrated supplement dose to encourage new growth. Most died at this stage, no longer able even to breathe.

Not this Zom, though. It sat, eyes closed, slack-mouthed, its monitors beeping gently, as the doctor loosened the straps and hooked in the Trodes that would stimulate the brain, forge new neuronal pathways, perhaps even bring back language and higher thought to a creature that currently was all instinct and lizard-brain.

'I'm implementing the new technique,' the doctor told her. Neema recorded the dosages through her wrist-link as he rattled them off to her. The few times they had gotten this far, the doctor had been cautious, trying to keep the re-growth slow and careful. This time, he had told Neema, he was going to try super-saturation, forcing the neurons to grow back as fast as possible.

Finally satisfied with the various levels and doses of hormones, stems and stims pumping over and through the ravaged skull of the Zom, he stepped back and lifted his gaze to Neema.

'That went better than usual,' he remarked. His pallid eyes blinked at her. 'Cramer over at Central's looking for a virus cure. Idiot. You can't repair a brain with bugs.'

He told her these things, Neema knew, to test her. His own staunchly physical methods were so far effective at nothing but killing the Zoms, and were slow and expensive to boot. But if someone could Gengineer a virus that replicated his methodology but bettered his results, they could cure the Zoms in one fell swoop. So should she abandon her doctor and try for the same deal - free help for free cure - with this Cramer? She was too ignorant to judge - the doctor knew it, she knew it.

Besides, her courage faltered at the thought of having to persuade another sponsor into helping her. The doctor had been charitable in his own way, to take her on as his assistant, as untrained, uneducated, and unauthorised as she was.

She summoned a smile and dressed in her robe again. As her body was smothered, she felt herself disappearing with it. The gloves were last; her hands vanished. She nodded to the doctor and trudged up the stairs.

She had intended to go back to Lalleh, still waiting in the kitchen, and report that her once-husband had managed more than most other Zoms, and survived the surgery. But her feet turned and took her to the room beside her own bedroom.

Inside, the Zom female lay strapped by the wrists to the bed. Its hands were heavily bandaged. Unlike their male Zom, Neema's sister was a biter. Neema stood in the doorway. The smell here was worse than the lab and the Zomart, and not one she ever got used to. 'We've improved,' she said. 'We've got the survival rate up. Not long now, Zana.'

Why lie to the insentient thing that lay on the bed, soiling itself, gnawing its own fingers to the bone? They were no closer than they'd been a year ago, except that a rapist's brain was re-growing in the basement, Neema's sister was chained like an animal, and some other doctor was playing with viruses instead.

Neema took off her gloves and fished a chunk of meat from the bucket by the door. Her fingers came out wet and sticky. She slid the scrap between her sister's lips, pulling her hand away as soon as she felt the teeth grip at it. The Zom sucked it down its throat without chewing and licked at the liquid left on its lips. Its fixed gaze at the ceiling never

wavered towards Neema. She wiped her hands clean on a towel and put her gloves back on. She was grateful it was too far gone to learn to associate her presence with food.

'Not long now, Zana,' she said again. 'It can't be much longer.' She shut the door and started for the kitchen. A sudden cry from the lab, however, sent her running back to the doctor.

'Look, Neema,' he said. His eyes, that cold, pale blue, were gleaming. He thrust one unsteady finger at the table, where the Zom still lay amid the wires feeding into its skull.

Its eyes had opened. Neema saw immediately what had wrenched that excited cry from the doctor's throat. The dark cow-eyes of the Zom had taken on a new sheen. It blinked slowly and made a noise that might have been a question. The steady hum of the monitors had taken on a more urgent note.

'It's happening,' said the doctor. 'It's working.'

Behind her, Neema heard a clatter as Lalleh stumbled down the stairs. She, too, must have heard the doctor call out and come running. She scurried across the packed earth of the basement floor, and Neema reached out to catch her arm.

'Just wait,' she cautioned her. 'M. Lalleh, please.'

Lalleh did the unthinkable, tore off her head covering to reveal a thick cascade of black curls, a startling mass about her small face. 'Michael, it's me, it's me, I'm here now.'

Neema averted her eyes but the doctor had not even noticed the impropriety; he was too intent on watching the Zom for a sign of recognition.

The Zom creaked out a noise again. Neema felt her mouth fill with a metallic aftertaste. It really was waking up. This rapist was waking up. But if he went free, undeservedly, then so would her sister - and her sister was also undeserving, by the laws of this city, because she had refused to wear the robe and veil, had committed Incitement to Rape, preferring to have her identity carved from her brain than smothered by cloth.

It raised its hand and seemed to look at it. It said something, thick and unintelligible. Its gaze drifted to its wife. 'No.' That was clear enough. It reached out, picked up the doctor's discarded scalpel, and pierced itself through the eye with the razoring laser. It looked at Neema as it did this, not its wife, and Neema watched the rekindled light blast into nothing, listened to the keen of the monitors as readings failed on heart and brain.

Lalleh screamed and threw herself at the Zom. Neema stood frozen, unable to move to tear the other woman away from the dead body. Killed itself; took a single breath as a re-sentient being and killed itself. Was it weakness or unflinching honesty that guided its hand? She put the back of her hand against her mouth and swallowed but the dry heaves would not subside.

She went up the stairs and to her sister's room. She stood in the doorway, breathing hard into the cloth on the back of her hand. Not long now? Not long now?

Behind her, down the hallway, she heard the doctor escorting Lalleh out through the kitchen. Neema could hear the dull murmur of the doctor's voice in between the woman's quietening sobs. Perhaps he was comforting her. Perhaps he was reminding her she could not report him without condemning herself.

He came and stood beside her. Out of the corner of her eye, she was aware he was looking at her sister, not her. 'That was promising.' His voice was unchanged. 'I need another one.'

Neema straightened. She took her hand from her mouth, adjusted the sit of her robe, head covering and gloves. Her face veil was in the kitchen, she remembered. 'I'll go get you one.'

She knew which one. She might even get another discount.

END.

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