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Sullied Flesh

by

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Girard leaned against the side of a brick building, warming his hands around a cup of overly sweet cappuccino and gauged the traffic, trying to find an opening. Jaywalking wasn't illegal any more, just dangerous. As he watched, electric buses rolled by in stately procession, overtaken by faster hybrids and pure fuel-cell compacts. Every now and then, a smoke-belching taxicab, tossing out East Indian electronic trance music, cut across lanes in defiance of traffic laws and physics.

New York rush hour at its finest, Girard thought. He checked his watch, took a quick gulp of coffee, and considered the marquee across the street. RICHARD BURTON'S *HAMLET* proclaimed the smart neon above the box office. He felt his jaw muscles tighten. *It was Shakespeare's Hamlet, for chrissake*. After a moment, the neon untied itself, flattened into a straight line, then tied itself into a new message: STARRING GIRARD PETERSON. Girard nodded in quiet satisfaction, feeling a fraction of the tension retreat from his neck and jaw. The majority, however, clung to him like a terrier. He'd done this show, wearing different NAGs, every season for his entire professional career. It was the price you paid to tread the boards anywhere in North America, and Girard knew that. But it was wrong. *Besides*, he reminded himself, *Will had been an actor himself. He'd approve of this... or fire my ass if I screwed it up for the rest of the company.*

Another glance at his watch told Girard he had to get moving. He screwed his courage to the sticking place, and tugged his wool cap down closer to his ears against the cold, damp November wind. With a quick breath, he kicked off like a sprinter, dodged a bike messenger, avoided a stalled tourist bus, and hit the pavement next to the theater's rear exit. Someone cursed at him in Farsi, and Girard automatically flipped off the driver. The door before him slammed open, and Steve Hanson, the stage manager, burst out, eyes wild.

Right on cue. Steve stood a head taller than him, a bearded giant of a man who favored corporate suits ten years out of style, and therefore cheap. He bought them at thrift stores, ripped out the computer links and pocket humidors, and washed the pleats out of them. It made him look like a homeless victim of some corporate downsizing.

Steven's eyes locked with Girard's. "Girard! What the *hell* is wrong with you?!" His voice threatened to crack, as it always did before a performance. The giant held up a bulky knockoff Rolex and violently pointed at it with his other hand. "We are 20 minutes to curtain." He gulped air. "Twenty! Barely enough time to dress, let alone—"

Girard held up a hand to forestall the rest. He finished his coffee in one long swallow to give himself a moment to find his center. "I've already wearing my NAG, Steven." His voice was a near-perfect duplicate of Richard Burton's famous baritone. With one hand, he tossed the empty coffee cup into a recycling bin; the other doffed his wool cap. Under his short blond curls, Girard's neural augmentation gateway—his NAG—was already in place, a small band of flesh-colored biochips that filled the gap between his eyebrows and hairline. "Now can we get inside? It's a witch's teat out here."

“Well, shit,” Steven said, and stood aside. Girard stepped past him, his body appearing heavier, more solid with each step, more like a solid Welshman than a skinny kid named Jerry from Queens. “You’re a royal pain, you know that?” the stage manager called at his back.

“For Hamlet, there is no other,” Girard said without slowing. When he turned the corner to the bathroom, he slipped inside and locked the door behind him. Under the painfully bright fluorescent lights, he inspected the NAG. Steven hadn’t noticed anything out of the ordinary, nor had Girard really expected him to. Still... with his fingertips, he touched the edge of the warm plastic and scratched the skin near the edge, where it always itched. The NAG looked like the union model. It certainly irritated him like the real one.

“The proof of the pudding,” he told his reflection, and left the bathroom.

* * *

Actors filled the big unisex dressing room. Most were dressed in costume, seated before the wall mirror and checking their makeup. A few latecomers laced up doublets and bodices. Mike Chang, the new Rosencrantz, practiced his vocal exercises. “Ah-ah-ah-ah-hah!” The Best Off-Broadway Theater’s production of *Hamlet* ran four-and-a-half hours, and this was everyone’s last chance to prepare themselves. Mike saw Girard enter the room, and gave a quick wave. “Hi! Ah-hah!”

Girard waved back. He found the pre-curtain energy oddly soothing, and he greeted people with nods and quick squeezes on the shoulder, working his way toward his locker. Nancy Mishikawa, his lover and the company’s union tech, moved about the room with her datapad. “Nice of you to join us,” she said. “I’ll be with you as soon as I finish with Alex.” She waved the datapad in front of the NAG on Alexandria Nussbaum, who played Ophelia using the persona of Cate Blanchett. Alexandria’s neural augmentation gateway was one of the newer models,

smaller, and easier to hide in the actress' thick black curls. The biochip appliance was also—according to Nancy—fussy as a diva before an interview.

“No need,” Girard said. “Just give me minute to slip into my finery and have a bit of Irish courage. Tend to the others.”

Silence blossomed in the dressing room, and several actors took extra interest in their eye shadow, the lay of their ribbons, or the fit of a boot. Girard hung up his street clothes in his locker, which had a red star plastered across the top. Someone from the company had drawn a bottle of Guinness and the words, “This space for rent” on the star. Girard slipped on his tights and squeezed onto a bench. As he rummaged around for his favorite socks, he felt something brush his temple. He turned slowly, found himself staring into Nancy's face. “Hello, darling.”

“Hello yourself,” she said, and kissed him. “No whiskey.... All I taste is that evil coffee.”

“Jeez, I was only kidding,” he said, a bit louder than he intended. “I'm as sober as the Pope at Christmas, I swear.” He felt the tension ebb from the room.

The first time he'd put on the Burton NAG, he'd fallen so far into the actor's persona that he'd shown up drunk for the next day's rehearsal. Fortunately, the director had chosen to blame the NAG programmer and not Girard's lack of self control. Since that day, Girard had worked hard to keep his identity separate from the artificial persona.

“Just wanted to make sure,” Nancy said. Moving her lips close to his ear, she whispered. “I bought some new massage oil. We can test drive it after the show.”

Girard felt himself redden just slightly. “Anything you say. Now let me get dressed, wench.”

Nancy leaned back and ran her fingers over the edge of Girard's eyebrows. "You know, I don't care if your housemate was top of his class at MIT. If he synched your NAG wrong and it hiccups during a soliloquy, I'm responsible. They could yank my union card." She wrapped her fingers around a blond curl and tugged it, hard. "That's not going to happen, is it?"

"Perish the thought," Girard replied warmly. He grinned against the pain.

"That's my boy." Nancy released his hair. "See you after the show." She stepped back and surveyed the room. "Break a leg, everybody." She packed up her gear and left. Girard gave the actors a wide grin. *Show time!*

* * *

"Whither wilt thou lead me? Speak; I'll go no further." Girard stopped his slow pacing across the stage, leaned back, and fought the impulse to cross his arms. Facing him across the stage stood Harry Sanchez. His stylized armor, bathed in a nimbus of holographic fog, transformed the old character actor into the somber ghost of Hamlet's father.

"Mark me!" cried the ghost in the rafter-shaking tones of Brian Blessed.

"I will." Girard's voice was almost quiet in comparison, echoes of a child who has recently lost a parent.

"My hour is almost come, when I to sulf'rous and tormenting flames must render up myself." The ghost's eyes seem to cloud over in anticipation of his coming pain.

"Alas, poor ghost."

"Pity me not," said the ghost, "but lend thy serious hearing to what I shall unfold."

"Speak. I am bound to hear." Girard took a step closer, as his sense of duty overcame his fear of this apparition.

The ghost drew himself up taller, regaining a measure of his former vitality. “So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear.”

Girard allowed a small portion of his attention to check out the audience. It felt like a good mix: students, couples, fellow actors, and the inevitable critics. The reviewer for the caustic *City Curmudgeon.com* sat in the second row, dead center. Her holographic activity gatherer, black as onyx, merged with a silk scarf that tied back her shoulder-length hair. Her eyes had the telltale look of the HAG-ridden. The thousand-yard stare, as Girard’s grandfather Billy used to say. After the show, the reviewer would download her memories directly from the HAG to her home system and write her opinions (Girard suspected) using a NAG with the writing style of Noel Coward, Oscar Wilde, or maybe Kurt Vonnegut. Certainly she wouldn’t try anything *original*, like her own voice.

“If thou didst ever thy dear father love—”

“O God!” Girard’s cry was a challenge. He clapped his hand to his sword as if insulted.

“Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder,” finished the ghost.

“Murder?”

“Murder most foul, as in the best it is, but this most foul, strange, and unnatural.”

Girard took a step closer to the ghost, strength coming into his limbs, fire blazing in his eyes. “Haste me to know’t, that I with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love, may sweep to my revenge.”

Now he drew a few inches of steel, his shoulders tense. He knew it wasn’t part of the Burton performance, but it felt right, and he had some leeway in his actions. Fortunately for him, the Richard Burton persona overlay had been assembled from old film footage, interviews, and interpretations by a dozen directors. It was an approximation at best.

Harry, on the other hand, wore a NAG with an exact recording of Brian Blessed's performance from the Renaissance Shakespeare Company's production of *Hamlet*. Every movement, expression, and inflection of Blessed was transmitted directly to Harry's frontal lobes. They had spent weeks refining the blocking to accommodate the different physical requirements of each actor's NAG.

"But know," the ghost announced, "thou noble youth, the serpent that did sting thy father's life now wears his crown."

"O my prophetic soul! My uncle?"

"Ay, that that incestuous, that adulterate beast..." The ghost continued his complaining exposition, and Hamlet swore to empty his head of all things but memory and vengeance.

In the second act, while Polonius and his servant awaited Ophelia, Girard hovered in the wings and absentmindedly rubbed his forehead. He felt another headache coming on. But it was more than the NAG. He could feel his own anxiety sinking its teeth into his neck. For three months, while his roommate Migdad reverse-engineered the NAG, Girard had practiced his lines, crafting his performance to match the recording of Burton's performance. He could do it in his sleep, he knew. Now the question was whether or not he could do it with an audience.

He squeezed an acupressure point between his thumb and forefinger and tried to quiet his anxiety. "Nice doggie," he whispered to the budding headache. *Now where can I find a rock?*

"What are people thinking?" his grandfather had once asked Girard over a couple of rum and Cokes during last summer's record heat wave. "When NATO dumped combat training into people's brains during the Ukraine Interdiction, everybody screamed 'Frankenstein.' Now

you're telling me that you have to wear a NAG to get a job in theater, for chrissakes." He wiped his sweaty forehead with the edge with a frayed cotton handkerchief. "I just don't get it."

"The civilian NAG is different," Girard had said patiently. He'd had this discussion with his grandfather before, but the old man had difficulty recalling their previous conversations. Despite targeted gene therapy, Alzheimer's was knocking at the old man's door. "The biochips aren't as powerful as the military units. I can still control my voice and body if I really wanted to."

"Uh, huh. What if the program wants something else?"

"Well," Girard paused. "Some of the NAG programs are more tightly written than others. If you license Branagh's *Macbeth*, you have to do the whole thing verbatim." He added quickly, "But that's not the case with every program."

"With the popular ones, I bet," his grandfather said in a knowing tone. "It's all gonna be Disney soon."

Girard couldn't think of anything to say at that point.

* * *

After he had killed Polonius, Hamlet sat on the edge of the Queen's bed and continued their conversation. Girard's head pounded, and his NAG kept prodding him to stand, to pace, to cry out his lines in Burtonish fashion. Wrong, it felt wrong. It was too easy to rail against the heavens and play the madman. But wasn't there greater power in quiet madness, to use this moment of shared horror to try to connect one last time with his mother? He decided to risk it.

The Queen clutched her hands, imploring, "What shall I do?"

Girard closed his eyes for a moment as if considering his answer, and conjured the password in his mind that would trigger the interrupt switch in his NAG. Half a breath later, the

mask of Richard Burton fell away, and Girard continued with only the barest of flutters in his stomach. “Not this, by no means, that I bid you do...” He reached out to touch the Queen’s check, hesitated, drew back, then continued. When he spoke of going to England, it was with true sadness. He didn’t want to leave his mother now, not when she needed him! But he had a duty. With a sad smile, he pulled back the arras again and made to pick up the body within. “Good night, Mother.”

The Queen gathered up her dignity and exited stage right. Girard glanced after her, nodded, and grabbed a handful of Polonius’ doublet. He dragged the body out, a grim smile on his face. The proof of the pudding, indeed.

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The fourth act had gone well enough. The actors playing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were old friends of Girard, and they had done summer stock versions of the Tom Stoppard homage when they were drama students at SUNY. Their familiar energy gave Girard a much-needed boost, and he once again cast aside Burton’s mask to muse on the impending death of twenty thousand men. Resolved to his own bloody thoughts, he exited stage right, where Nancy waited.

“Hey,” she whispered. Horatio, Gertrude and a Gentleman entered from stage left.

“Hey yourself,” Girard replied in a soft voice.

“How are you holding up?” she asked, and leaned in for a quick kiss. He returned the kiss, added a wink.

“High and tight.”

“That’s good,” she said. “The director thinks you’re cocky tonight. He’s worried you’re overshadowing Claudius again.”

Girard rolled his eyes. “That’s my job. Besides, what do they expect with Patrick Stewart’s NAG?”

“Yeah,” said Nancy, nodding. “I always thought his Claudius was a bit prissy.”

“The first time I saw him hand over the poisoned wine, I expected him to say ‘Engage!’”

Nancy gave a quiet chuckle. Then, tiptoeing closer to the curtain, she listened to a bit of dialog and checked her watch. “You don’t have much time, Jerry.”

“I know.”

She gave him an appraising look. “Are you okay?”

“Tell the director I’m fine.”

“I will, but something feels off tonight. Some of the other actors think you’re channeling Burton’s ego again. NAG misbehaving?”

Girard unconsciously brushed at his hair. “Just a bigger headache than usual. Price of fame.”

“Now you know how I feel about high heels.” Though her tone was dismissive, she studied Girard for another moment. Finally, she whispered “Time” and bounded off, a gazelle in a concrete savannah.

Girard squared his shoulders, took a deep breath, and switched on the NAG. He’d let Burton’s ghost out to play for now.

* * *

Laertes leapt into the grave and commanded to be buried with his sister. Girard broke out of his hiding place and announced himself. “What is he whose grief bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow conjures the wand’ring stars, and make them stand like wonder-wounded heroes? This is I, Hamlet the Dane.”

“The devil take thy soul!” cried Laertes, and pulled Girard into the grave. Girard caught himself on his knees, then seized Laertes hands and commanded him hold off his hand.

They wrestled while the Queen called her son’s name and the funeral attendants swarmed forward to separate them. One of the Attendants missed his blocking and grabbed Girard by the back of his hair rather than his shoulder. Girard twisted to the side to compensate, and smacked his head into the side of the grave, which was not soft earth, but aluminum and plywood. He felt a corner of the NAG scrape off. Instantly, Burton’s ghost fled.

“Good my lord, be quiet,” said Horatio, both stern and compassionate.

Girard pressed the NAG back down against his forehead. Nothing. He conjured the cutoff switch password. Nothing. *Oh shit.*

Sensing a problem, the Queen stepped toward her son. “O my son, what theme?”

Girard dropped his hands. “I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers could not make up my sum. What wilt thou do for her?” He stared at Laertes, wincing inside over the botched line.

“O,” the King said, “he is mad, Laertes.” He sounded gentle, almost fatherly.

“For the love of God forebear him,” the Queen said.

“Swounds, show me what thou’ t do,” Girard said. He pushed away the men who stood near him, began to wave his arms. It was an old mnemonic, and it worked. “Woo’ t weep? Woo’ t fight? Woo’ t fast? Woo’ t tear thysel? Woo’ t drink up eisel? Eat a crocodile?” He felt the words come more smoothly now, felt his arms relax.

Somehow Girard finished the scene, offering up a quick prayer of thanks to whatever gods watched over actors and fools as he and Horatio exited stage right. During the scenery change, Nancy pounced on him. “What happened?” She sealed the NAG down with makeup adhesive. Girard tried to protest, but she slapped his hands away.

“I’m okay,” he hissed.

“Is the NAG working?” she said.

“The signal cut out when I hit my head.”

“Damn, we’ll have to go to intermission.”

“I’m okay,” Girard insisted. “Nancy, it’ll be okay, I swear.”

She glanced behind her, saw the holograph for Elsinor covering the stage, saw Horatio waiting, pleading with his eyes. “You owe me.” She grabbed Girard’s shoulders with painful strength. “If you drop one more line, we’re both fucked.” She whipped him around and propelled him toward the waiting Horatio. “Break a leg.”

* * *

They stood facing each other across a crowded stage, sweating, trying not breathe hard. Their swords did not waver. The Queen looked pale and clutched a cloth to her forehead.

“Come for the third, Laertes. You do but dally,” Girard said. His opponent was flustered, and it disrupted his parries. “I pray you pass with your best violence; I am sure you make a wanton of me.”

Laertes straightened and glared. “Say you so? Come on!” He launched a feint toward Girard’s chest, then dropped the point at the last moment, hoping to score a touch above the knee. Girard beat in eight, and riposted. Laertes retreated, cutting the air with his blade.

Girard moved his left foot forward in preparation for a lunge. At the last moment, Laertes seemed to notice this and counterattacked with a stop thrust. Girard beat back, feinted, thrust.

Osric, looking on, stopped the action and declared no legal touch.

Laertes lost his temper. “Have at you now!” he shouted and flèched. He caught Girard high on the ribs, receiving a riposte to the shoulder in return.

“Part them. They are incensed,” said Claudius.

“Nay, come—again!” cried Girard. He started toward his opponent as the Queen dropped to the floor.

“Look to the queen there, ho!”

Moments later, the Queen fell, poisoned.

“O villainy! Ho! Let the door be locked! Treachery! Seek it out.”

Laertes fell, and confessed.

Girard stabbed the King, then begged the poisoned cup from Horatio.

“O, I die, Horatio! The potent poison quite o’ercrows my spirit. I cannot live to hear the news from England, but I do prophesy th’ election lights on Fortinbras. He has my dying voice.” He raised his hand to clutch his friend’s shoulder. “So tell, with th’ occurrents, more and less, which have solicited—the rest is silence.”

He slipped gratefully to the stage.

* * *

After the curtain calls, Girard hastily dressed and stole away to a nearby cafe, where he parked himself in a corner with a tray of demitasse cups and sweets. He kept one eye on the door, waiting for Nancy. After an hour, she strode in, wearing an enormous fur coat of questionable ancestry. She blinked, her eyes adjusting to the dim interior light, then spotted Girard. With enviable grace, she negotiated a pathway between tables, easing into the vacant chair next to him.

“Coffee?” Girard said.

“Yuck.” She grimaced and pulled back her coat to reveal a silver whiskey flask tucked into a nylon holster that occasionally housed a 9mm pistol. “Libations?”

“Water of life,” Girard said. “You have my full attention, love.”

“I should hope so.” Nancy nabbed a clean water glass from a nearby table and poured two fingers of whiskey into it. She knocked this back, and refilled it. Then she reached into an outside pocket of her coat and set his NAG on the table. She said, “It doesn’t work.”

He turned the NAG over in his hands. “Well, shit, I’ll have rent a backup tomorrow and get this one fixed.”

“Good luck getting it repaired.” Nancy said. “It has some nonstandard biochips, including what appears to be a bypass circuit. Something your housemate grew in the basement?”

“Something like that,” Girard admitted.

“So how long have you been faking it?” Nancy asked.

“Not that long. A few weeks, a month,” he said. Or two. “I started cutting off the persona a few minutes at a time. Minor speeches, stuff like that. Then, when no one noticed....” He tapped the NAG against the table. “This is the fake, Nancy. This—” he pointed at his heart and dropped his voice into Burton’s register —“this is real. Living flesh and blood, complete with mistakes and foibles, not some bit-copy of some actor’s better days.”

“Is it worth losing your union card?” she replied, taking another shot of whisky.

“I hope not.” He shifted back to his own voice. “If that happens, I’ll manage. It wouldn’t be the first time I waited tables.”

Nancy snorted. “Try again.”

“Okay. I’ve got a cousin in the Bronx who always needs help around the office. Look, that’s not the point.” He put down the NAG and gently took her hand. “Nancy, do you know how many productions of *Hamlet* are running in the Five Boroughs?”

She shook her head.

“Eleven, at last count. And three are running the Burton NAG, either solely, or in rotation with those of Jacobi or Fiennes or Gonzales. They do decent business, but nothing like us. We sell out most nights. When people come to see the play, they come to see *me*, not some puppet dancing to the strings of a dead actor. The real power of Shakespeare, of all good theater, is that sense of hyper-reality. It’s the experience of sharing a moment in time with live human beings who are interpreting some universal ideas to entertain and enlighten.

“Every night, it’s different. We see inspiration, love, struggle—“

“Clumsiness,” she said.

“And clumsiness,” he agreed. “That’s what makes it special. That moment will never be repeated. At least I hope it won’t.”

“Is this when you ask me if I’m going to turn you in?” Nancy said.

“I suppose it is.” He took her hand. “Are you?”

Nancy drew his hand up to her lips and gave his knuckles a tiny bite. “Not at the moment. Maybe not ever.”

“Thanks, Nancy.” He felt his shoulders ease back.

“Don’t thank me yet. I think you better sign a confession that absolves me of any responsibility in case you screw up.” She put his hand down. “Have to look out for my best interests, after all.”

“I understand completely,” Girard said, and leaned over to kiss her. She put a hand up, catching him under the sternum.

“I’m not finished,” Nancy said. “You may be comfortable pulling this shit, but I’m not. If you want to do live theater, then *do* it. Don’t dick around with the tourists from Jersey who think they’re seeing Richard Burton. When this run’s over, you should turn in your card and join one of the low-tech groups.”

“Like Drama Without a Net?” Girard said.

“Yeah, or The Play’s The Thing. Work the fringe circuit. I’ll even help out if I can. Just promise me you’ll use my NAG for rest of the run.”

“I promise.”

She stared into his eyes for an awkward minute as if measuring his words. “Okay, then.” She stood up. “Come on. You owe me a favor and I feel like collecting.”

THE END