

Once More, with Feeling

By Jen Matteis

The man was stomping around upstairs again, and that gave Margaret everything she needed to loathe him. He'd arrived after check-in two days ago and she had not yet seen him—despite the ruckus he made. If it weren't for it being the off-season, and the complete lack of other guests, she'd have kicked him out.

"Decent men don't clomp around like that." She'd thought she was speaking only to herself, but at that moment James walked in.

"Keep wrinkling your nose like that and it'll stick that way." James brushed the snow off his shoulders. "Those cookies only for guests?"

"Help yourself." She waved at the tray. "Only one guest, and he hasn't bothered to come down."

"Still?" James bit into one of the cookies. "Chocolate chip. If I didn't know better, I'd think you made them just for me."

"Still. And he's booked a month! Can you believe it? I have to cook him breakfast every morning, whether he eats it or not. That's why they call it a bed and breakfast. He could have the decency to come down in the morning. I wonder what he does up there that makes such a racket."

James swallowed the last of the cookie and shrugged. "Want me to go speak with him? Pretend something needs checking?"

“Or just wait five minutes. With all that clomping around he’s bound to break something, and it’ll need fixing.” Margaret sighed. “Yes, please do. It’s Room 3, you can always check that the shower’s not leaking. It’s always leaking.”

“Alright.”

James knocked on the door. The moment he did, the racket stopped. There was a moment’s pause.

“What is it?” The man’s voice was hesitant, almost afraid.

“Maintenance. I was wondering if I could check on the pipes. Had some trouble in the past.”

“Just a minute.” The banging resumed for a moment. “Sorry for the noise.”

The door cracked open. It was dim inside; James could barely make out the stranger’s face. He extended his hand. “James Phardon.”

“Paul.” The stranger wore gloves and a hat. His face was expressionless in the dim light. “I have something I need to do in the other room. You don’t mind?”

James lowered his hand when it became clear Paul was not going to take it. “Course not.” He stepped inside.

The stranger backed away from him. His footsteps were strangely heavy, despite his slim form.

James waited a moment for Paul to say something. “So, what brings you to Tolcett?”

“My work.” The man’s voice was nervous, almost angry. It put James on edge.

“And what’s your work?”

“I am... I was a scientist.” He went silent abruptly and stared at the floor. “It doesn’t matter. And you?”

“Plumber, among other things.” James opened the bathroom door and went in. “This shower’s been known to leak.” He flipped the light on. The sink was bone dry. There was no toothbrush, no hairbrush, none of the things a guest typically kept in the bathroom. He opened the shower door. It, too, was dry. “You haven’t used this?” James couldn’t keep the surprise from his voice.

“If you are done prying about my business—and my sanitary habits—I would ask you to leave,” said Paul. “I am a paying guest.”

“Of course. My apologies.”

“You didn’t claim you weren’t spying?” asked Margaret. “Could you think of nothing to say to the man?”

James scratched his beard. “Nothing came to mind.”

The guest’s heavy footsteps came down the stairs and out the back door. The sound made him seem angry, but it was the same racket he’d made ever since arriving. James took another cookie from the tray. He was seated on the plush sofa beside Margaret.

“Men,” said Margaret. James had nothing to say to that.

“I was a biotechnician.” Paul had come down for breakfast but had not yet eaten. There was something odd about his face, Margaret had decided. And his hands, now that he’d taken his gloves off. His skin was stretched too

tight, and looked pale and waxy, like her father before he'd died. Or in the coffin. She shook the thought away.

"Where did you work?" She refilled his mug from the pot.

"Barstow University. Ten years."

James arrived with the newspaper. A cold gust of wind came in with him; it was snowing again. "Mind if I join you?"

"I was about to take this to my room." Paul stood. His eyes flicked from the newspaper to James. "Is there any chance I could take the newspaper as well? I don't mind paying a little extra for a morning paper."

James glanced at Margaret. "Of course," she said.

James handed it over. The man took the paper and went upstairs with it rolled under one arm and his breakfast plate in the other. "He's an odd one," said James.

"He pays well," said Margaret.

James sat. He stirred a spoonful of sugar into his mug thoughtfully. "There was an interesting story on the front page of the paper. I only got a glance."

"Yes?"

"A man was killed last night. At Fifth and Walston, not five blocks from here. Attacker didn't take his money, though."

"No?" Margaret's fingers tightened on her mug. She became conscious of it and put her hands on her lap.

"Took his skin, most of it. Cut it off with a knife, the report said. Likely that he bled to death."

"What?!" Her fingernails were digging into her palms.

"That's what I read." James glanced at the stairs meaningfully. "Odd sort, isn't he?"

"You can be odd without being a... butcher! He's a paying guest."

“He was out last night. At the same hour as the attack.”

“He’s allowed to go out whenever he likes.”

“Indeed, I am,” came a quiet voice from the stairs. “I came back for my coffee.”

Margaret reached for it, but clumsily. The mug spilled onto the table. She tried to catch the mess with napkins, then realized the man was standing beside her. He didn’t reach for the coffee. Instead, he gripped her wrist. His fingers were like cold iron bars pressed into her skin. She swallowed.

“Do you know what it’s like?” Paul asked.

James stood, fists clenched at his side. “You let go of her.”

“Do you know what it’s like?” he repeated, slower. “To be the first to succeed at something man has strived to achieve for centuries?”

Paul let go of Margaret’s arm. She pulled it back with a gasp. There were four red lines across her wrist where his fingers had gripped her. Then he rolled up his shirt sleeve.

At first, Margaret thought there was a wide metal armband starting just above his elbow. But the metal was lower on his arm than the skin of his hand and wrist. Finally, her mind made sense of it: he was wearing a long glove of skin over a metal arm.

“Immortality,” he said, both triumphant and sad. “I will live for as long as this metal body does. The word *breakthrough* does not begin to describe it. I created a self-replicating metal alloy that transforms flesh. But...I am trapped in metal now. I cannot feel with this metal skin. I cannot abide the cold because the metal burns the flesh underneath. And it has fused with my skin, there is no way out. The only way back—and not a real way back, but a way to feel again—is to coat the metal with skin.” Paul put his

fingers to his neck, as if to scratch an itch. Then he pulled down on the flesh, revealing metal underneath. “It lasts only for a little while. Skin to metal to whatever is left of me underneath. But it sloughs off, you see. The alloy rejects it, since it’s not my own. Still, I think I can find a way.”

James’s face was white. He said a prayer under his breath.

“What will you do to us?” Margaret’s voice shook.

Paul lifted his arm. He stared into Margaret’s eyes, then into James’s, with a cold gaze. Then he brought his arm down on the table. The surface cracked in two with a tremendous bang. The plates, mugs, and utensils slid to the centre and dropped onto the floor between the shattered slabs.

“Absolutely nothing,” he said. “But I am a paying guest. You will cook my meals and allow me to stay here.” He thought a moment. “And you will help me complete my work. When it is finished, I will leave.”

James caught Margaret’s eye. “Of course,” he said.

“And,” Paul poked a finger into the broken table. “If you tell anyone...” A deep crack developed. “I will kill you. Just as I did,” he reached up and poked the skin of his face, “this man. With great ease, I must add.”

Then he reached over to the sideboard and picked up the coffee pot. He poured a mug of coffee in a clean mug, stirred in sugar, and went back upstairs.

James and Margaret sat and stared at each other over the remains of the table.

It was surprisingly easy to not tell anyone, since, of course, no one asked. Worse yet, she knew no one would

believe her. And he'd promised to leave once his project was completed. That's how Margaret found herself talking to a homeless person sitting on the corner of Ninth and Madison. It was freezing out. But she was going to Hell, and it'd be plenty warm there. "Would you like a hot drink?" she asked.

Out of the pile of rags, a thin bony arm reached out and grabbed her wrist, right in the spot where Paul had gripped it so painfully a week back. She winced.

"I've found you," said a young voice, triumphant. The woman pulled back her hood. A sharp nose and bright eyes peered out like a hawk. "Now where, pray tell, is *he*?"

"Who are you?" exclaimed Margaret.

"The Missus," she announced with a grin. It didn't meet her eyes. "Here, as always, to get Paul out of the trouble he gets himself into."

This time, Paul was storming. Margaret was afraid it would rouse the neighbours. And she was worried for her hardwood floor, too. Her mouth opened, but James saw her and nudged her with his elbow. Hard.

"How did you find me?"

The Missus—Lucy, it had come out—shrugged. She'd ditched the rags in the street, and underneath them wore practical trousers and a blouse. "It wasn't particularly hard to follow a man who weighs a half ton. You were running so fast you left indentations in the pavement all the way to the train station. And the ticket collector on the 2:15 out of Barstow is still trying to figure out how such a 'skinny, professor-looking sort' managed to cause one of the seats to bow under his weight. He was happy to tell me you got off at Tolcett. Then, well, what you were doing was evident in the

papers, so I took the obvious route. And bribed the ticket collector not to tell anyone else. We won't be going on holiday this summer," she added wryly.

Paul cursed. He went up to her and took her wrists in his grasp. Margaret knew it must hurt, but the woman did not flinch. "Lucy, my dearest—"

"Don't 'dearest' me. We talked about this. If it worked, we were going to talk it over. You damn well weren't going to take it without telling me."

"I didn't—"

She tried to pull her hands free. "Let go of me."

Paul glanced down and let go quickly. "Your arms...I'm sorry." Her wrists were an angry red.

"Don't apologize for that. Apologize for leaving me!" Suddenly Lucy was in tears.

Margaret went to her side and put an arm around her. "Now look here," Margaret said. Across the room and behind Paul, James was motioning her to stop with both hands. She ignored him. "Because of your threats, I went out there with a plan to cause someone serious harm." If looks could kill, Lucy's glare would have killed Paul ten times over. "And I've put up with the damage you've done to my table, my plates and cups and my glorious wide oak flooring." Paul glanced down at the floors with a mixture of confusion and guilt. "But to leave a young girl like this, prancing off for a lifetime of 'immortality' as you put it, that's really shows how far you've strayed. You left her for a lifetime—an eternity—of imposing misery on others. Look at her! Brains and beauty. You dumb fool."

Paul's mouth hung open. He looked between Margaret and Lucy like he couldn't think of a word to say. Then he turned and stormed up the stairs to his room.

Dinner that night was a quiet affair. Earlier, more of the story had come out. Paul had killed the first man by mistake, a colleague who'd walked in on him the day after his transformation. He'd shoved him out of the way in the lab and broken his neck. Mad with rage and despair, terrified of the growing numbness in his body, he'd ripped the man's skin off and plastered it onto his own while the alloy was still working its way through his own flesh. It had worked. He felt the metal bind to the skin, then felt *through* the skin. Barely thinking, he took the man's face for his own. Warmth, the movement of the air; it was like being alive again. But his triumph had quickly been overwhelmed by horror, and he'd ran.

The university had called Lucy about the accident in the lab. And she'd followed.

"You're not eating," said Lucy. She was barely eating either.

Paul looked up from his plate. He'd been pushing a brussel sprout around with his fork. "Sometimes I do. But I don't know if I need to. I cannot taste it. And I never get hungry." He forced a smile. "I still drink coffee."

"Are..." Lucy glanced at Margaret and James, then back at Paul. "Are your thoughts the same? Are you the same as you were?"

Paul scowled. He glanced up at her, then down as if ashamed. He stabbed the sprout onto his fork, then set it aside. "I don't know. That first day, I held the alloy in my hand and my fingers grew cold. Numb. Then...nothing. Just a spreading cold that left my arm feeling lifeless." He looked up at Lucy, his mouth a thin hard line. "I think I died that day. It moved through my flesh, replicating the structure. It

took hours, all night. But there was no way I could sleep, for fear and excitement of what would happen when it reached my brain. In the early hours of the morning, my neck grew cold. The rest of me had a strange new alertness, but I could not sense the air around me or a light touch. I could feel again, but not as before. Just enough to move my limbs. Then it crept up my skull.” Margaret couldn’t recall when she’d stopped eating, but the rest of her meal was on her plate untouched. “I felt nothing,” he said desperately. “There are no pain receptors in the brain itself. I felt my face grow cold and tight. My thoughts slowed. I was calm, somehow. Numb, I suppose. There’s a chance it didn’t cross the blood-brain barrier. But that is still how I feel.” Abruptly, he picked up his fork and ate the sprout, chewing vigorously.

Lucy watched him for a moment intently. Then she let out an abrupt laugh. “So, you don’t know if you’re a cyborg or the first artificial intelligence?” She pushed her chair away and grasped her knees. Tears streamed from her face. Margaret couldn’t tell if she was laughing or crying.

Paul put down the fork. He stood and went to Lucy. Standing behind her, with great care, he touched her shoulders. “No idea.” Lucy turned to look up at him. He leaned down. Their lips were about to touch when Lucy’s face became overcome by horror. “Your lips.”

At that moment, the doorbell rang. It was a fine old doorbell, and its melodious chime reverberated through the house for what felt like a very long time. No one moved. It rang again.

“We’re not in,” said Paul tersely. Lucy nodded, catching Margaret’s eye.

“We know you’re home,” shouted a voice from the door. It was a voice that brooked no argument. “Open up.”

“Out the back,” said Lucy. “Quick.”

“They’ll be there already.” James stood. “I’m sorry, but I told them.”

A look of rage flashed across Paul’s face, followed quickly by wonder. “Not all numb, then. I suppose there is hope for me yet.” He glanced at Lucy. “You think I should turn myself in?”

She nodded. “Before anyone else gets hurt. It’s not worth it, Paul. We can do this the right way.”

Paul nodded, but glanced at the back door. “Then what? Back to the lab? No. It’s past that. The government will lock me up. I’ll be an experiment. There is no other way.”

“I’ll stay with you,” said Lucy.

“They won’t let you.” Paul turned and ran for the window. The boards creaked. He jumped, but a board broke underneath his weight and he fell into the floor. He tried to pull himself up with his hands, but more boards broke under his grasp. “Help me.”

Lucy ran to his side. Thoughtlessly, he reached for her arm. He pulled. Lucy screamed. Struck dumb, Paul saw what he’d done. Blood ran everywhere down the broken flooring. Lucy’s scream ended in a bubble of blood; she collapsed. Ruins of flooring stuck up around them. Paul screamed. It was an inhuman sound, louder than a man should be able to produce. Margaret covered her ears.

The policemen were pounding on the door. James ran to the front door and opened the lock. “Come quick!” Four officers rushed in, guns drawn. They formed a circle around Paul. One of the officers cursed under his breath. “Stay calm,” said a tall officer with dark hair. His eyes jumped around the room, and he motioned to Margaret. “Get back.” She couldn’t move.

“Lucy,” Paul stared into his wife’s eyes. “Lucy!” He pushed back against the body and the boards, trying to get loose. There was a loud sound of wood bending, snapping and breaking, and Paul fell through into the basement.

“The basement door! Where is it?” The tall officer addressed Margaret.

“In the kitchen,” Her legs were rubber.

“This way.” James led the officer away.

Margaret sank to her knees. Three of the officers were with James. The fourth held her hand to Lucy’s neck. She looked at Margaret and shook her head.

“I’m sorry.” The woman’s voice was kind, but it sounded like something she’d told a thousand other people before.

Margaret had lost all sense of time. She heard blood dripping—no, *running*—down onto the floor of the basement.

“He’s gone.” The first officer was back, the tall one. “We’ll find him, though. It’s amazing he hid as long as he did.”

“He said he’d kill us if we told anyone where he was,” said James. “And I did.”

“We’ll post a watch.” The tall policeman motioned to Margaret. “Can you take care of her?” he asked James.

They were at James’s house. Margaret had never been there before. A fire burned in the hearth and they were drinking—or at least in possession of—a glass of red wine each. Neither had touched theirs.

“What will happen to him?” Margaret asked glumly.

“I suppose we won’t ever know.” James’s hand was on her knee. She’d only just noticed. She thought of the alloy man feeling nothing, and shivered.

“What will happen to us?” Margaret looked up at James. His eyes were kind. Suddenly his arms were around her and he kissed her.

“Whatever we like,” he said. “First, I suppose I’ll fix the floor.”