

Near-Flesh

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Early on the morning of her forty-second birthday, Thelma Vole stood naked in the closet where her four MALE robots hung, and debated which one to pack for her trip to the Bureau convention. Boss Vole, as she was known in the office, had never been a beaming rodeo queen, and at that moment her two hundred and thirty pounds heaved with blue-veined menace. A knot of dull anger sat in her jaw and rippled with her thoughts. She hated business trips. She hated hotels. She hated the youngsters who were her peers in the Bureau, fifteen years her junior and far less experienced. More than anything else she hated having to go to a meeting on the weekend of her birthday.

She considered whether in her present mood it might not be best to take the Wimp along. She reached into the folds of the robot's deflated crotch and pinched the reinforced tubing that became an erect penis when the Wimp was switched on and operational. The pressure of her plump fingers on the skilfully simulated skin gave her a vivid satisfaction. She picked up one of the dangling legs, stretched the

skin of the calf across her lower teeth and bit down deliberately. The anger in her jaw clamped on the Near-Flesh. If the Wimp had been activated, the force of her bite would have produced a convincing blue bruise that disappeared only after deflation. Thelma had treated herself to the Wimp on an earlier birthday, her thirty-sixth, to be precise, when she was faced with more and more expensive repair bills on her two other MALEs. The Wimp, when inflated, was a thin, meek-faced, and very young man, definitely the least prepossessing of Thelma's robots. But he had been designed for Extreme Sadistic use, far beyond that which Thelma put him to even in her worst whiskey tempers. She had saved the Wimp's purchase price several times over in repair bills. And his Groveling program and Pleading tapes gave her a unique and irreplaceable pleasure.

Still, she did not want to celebrate her birthday in the frame of mind that required the Wimp. It was Thelma's custom to save up her libidinous energy for several days before a birthday and engage in unusual lengths and indulgences with her robots. While these Bureau meetings occurred twice and sometimes three times a year, it was the first time she could remember having to travel on her birthday.

She always took one of her MALEs along on these trips, usually Lips or Bluto. She was far too fastidious to rent one of the robots provided in hotels. Cleanliness concerned her, she also worried about what might happen with a robot that had not been programmed to her own specifications. There were terrible stories, rumors mostly, and probably all lies, but still... Thelma rearranged the Wimp on his hook so that he hung tidily, and reached up to rub her forearm across the mouth of the robot on the adjacent hook. Lips. Her first robot. She had saved for two years to buy him seventeen years ago. He was old now, outmoded, spectacularly primitive compared to the newer models. He had no variety, his voice tape was monotonous and repetitive. Even his body was relatively crude. The fingers were suggested by indentations in fin-like hands, the toes merely drawn, and his non-powered penis stayed hard, was in fact a solid rod of rubber like an antique dildo. Lips' attraction, of course, was his Vibrator mouth. His limbs moved stiffly, but his mouth was incredibly tender and voracious. She felt sentimental about Lips. She felt safe with him. She brought him out when she felt vulnerable and weepy. She liked to use him as a warm-up to Bluto. Bluto was the Muscle MALE, a sophisticated instrument that could pick her up and carry her to the shower or the bed or the kitchen table and make her feel (within carefully programmed limits) quite small and helpless. The power of Bluto's mechanism was such that Thelma had never dared to use his full range.

Bluto was the frequently damaged and expensively repaired cause of Thelma having to purchase the Wimp. Something about the big Muscle robot made her want to deactivate him and then stick sharp objects into his vital machinery. Bluto scared Thelma just a bit. She always made sure she could reach his off switch. She even bought the expensive remote control bulb to keep in her teeth while he was operational. Still there were times when she had to admit to herself that he was actually about as dangerous as a sofa. It was his Tough-Talk tape that kept the fantasy alive. His rough voice muttering, "C'mere slut, roll over, bitch," and the like could usually trigger some excitement even when she was tense and tired from work. She rubbed luxuriously against the smooth folds of Bluto's deflated form

where it hung against the wall. She didn't look at the deflated body on the fourth hook. She didn't glance toward the corner where the small console sat on the floor with its cord plugged into the power outlet.

The console was roughly the shape and size of a human head sitting directly, necklessly, on shoulders. A single green light glowed behind the steel mesh in the top of the console. She knew the Brain was watching her, wanting her to flip his activation switch. She deliberately slid her broad rump up and down against the smooth Near-Flesh of the Bluto MALE. The corner of her eye registered a faint waver in the intensity of the green light. She looked directly at the Brain. The green light began to blink on and off rapidly. Thelma turned her back on the Brain and sauntered out of the closet. She crossed to the full-length mirror on the bedroom door and stood looking at herself, seeing the green reflection of the brain's light from the open closet. She stretched her heavy body, stroking her breasts and flanks. The green light continued to blink.

"I think just for once I won't take any of these along on the trip." The green light went out for the space of two heartbeats. Thelma nearly smiled at herself in the mirror. The green flashing resumed at a greater speed. "Yes," Thelma announced coyly to her mirror, "it's time I tried something new. I haven't shopped for new styles in ages. There have probably been all sorts of developments since I last looked at a catalogue. I'll just rent a couple of late models from the hotel and have a little novelty for my birthday." The green light in the closet seemed to become very bright for an instant and then it stopped. Went out. It appeared again steady, dim, no longer flashing.

When Thelma had finished encasing her bulges in the severe business clothes that buttressed her image as a hard-nosed Bureau manager, she strode in the closet and flipped a switch on the base of the Brain console. The mesh face glowed with contrasting colored light, moving in rhythmic sheets across the screen. A male voice said, "Be sure to take some antiseptic lubricant along." The tone was gently sarcastic. Thelma chuckled. "Don't worry about me. I'll take an antibiotic and I won't sit on the toilets."

"You know you'd rather have me along." The console's voice was clear, unemotional. A thin band of red pulsed across the mesh screen.

"Oh, a little variety is good for me. I tend to get into ruts." Thelma's coquettish manner felt odd to her in her business suit, grating. She was accustomed to being naked when she talked to the Brain. "It's too bad," she murmured spitefully, "that I have to leave you plugged in. It's such a waste of power while I'm away..." She watched the waves of color slow to a cautious blip on the screen. "Well, I'll be back in three days..." She reached for the switch.

"Happy Birthday," said the console as its colors faded into the dim green.

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Boss Vole strode off the elevator as soon as it opened and was halfway down the line of work modules before the young man at the reception desk could alert the staff by pressing the intercom buzzer. The Vole always made a last round of the office before these business trips. She claimed it was to pick up last-minute papers, but everyone knew she was there to inject a parting dose of her poisonous presence, enough venom to goad them until her return. Lenna Jordan had been

the Vole's assistant too long to be caught by her raiding tactics. She felt the wave of tension slide through the office in the silenced voices, the suddenly steady hum of machines, and the piercing "Yes, Ma'am!" as the Vole pounced on an idling clerk. Jordan pushed the bowl of candy closer to the edge of the desk where the Vole usually leaned while harassing her, and went back to her reports.

She heard a quick tread and felt the sweat filming her upper lip. Boss Vole hated her. Jordan was next in line for promotion. Her future was obvious, a whole district within five years. Boss Vole would stay on here in the same job she had held for the past decade. The Vole's rigid dedication to routine had paralyzed her career. She grew meaner every year, and more bitter. Jordan could see her now, thumping a desk with her big soft knuckles and hissing into the face of the gulping programmer she had caught in some petty error.

When the Vole finally reached Jordan's desk she seemed mildly distracted. Jordan watched the big woman's rumpled features creasing and flexing around the chunks of candy as they discussed the work schedule. Boss Vole was anxious to leave, abbreviating her usual jeers and threats in her hurry. When she grabbed a final fistful of candy and stumped out past the bent necks of the silently working staff, Jordan noticed that she carried only one small suitcase. Where was her square night case? Jordan had never seen the Vole leave for a trip without her robot-carrier. A quirk of cynicism caught the corner of her mouth. Has the Vole gone and found herself a human lover? The notion kept Jordan entertained for the next three days.

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By the time Thelma Vole closed the door on the hotel bellman and checked out the conveniences, she had assured herself that in most respects this trip would be like all the others, lonely and embarrassing. Back when she'd gone to her first convention as an office manager her current bureaucratic peers were still skipping rope. Thelma flopped onto the bed, kicked off her heavy shoes, and reached for the communiphone. She asked for a bottle of Irish whiskey and a bucket of ice. Hesitantly, after pausing so long that the room-service computer asked whether she was still on the line, she also asked for a Stimulus Catalogue.

She poured a drink immediately but didn't pick up the glossy catalogue. The liquor numbed her jittery irritation and allowed her to lie still, staring at the ceiling. The Brain was right. She was afraid. She was lonely for him. All her life she had been lonely for him. When she first landed her G-6 rating she realized that she might as well devote herself to the Bureau since nothing else seemed a likely receptacle for her ponderous attentions. It was then that she jettisoned the one human she had ever had any affection for. He was a shy and exaggeratedly courteous little man, a G-4, who had professed to see her youthful bulk as cuddly, her lack of humor as admirable seriousness. She had been hesitant. Displays of affection meant to Thelma that someone was out to use her. He was persistent, however, and she allowed herself to entertain certain fantasies. But one day, as she stood with her clean new G-6 rating card in her hand, and listened to him invite her to dinner as he had done so many times before, Thelma looked at her admirer and recognized him for what he was: a manipulator and an opportunist.

She slammed the door convincingly in his injured face and resolved never to be fooled again by such treacle shenanigans.

She had been saving for Lips. And Lips had been good for her. The long silence after she left the office each day had been broken at last, if only by the mechanical and repetitive messages of the simple robot's speech tape. She bought Bluto when she was pumped with bravado from her promotion to G-7 and office manager. Bluto thrilled her. His deliberately crude and powerful bluntness created a new identity in her, the secret dependency of the bedroom. But she was still lonely. There were the rages, fits of destructiveness once she had turned the robot off. She had never dared to do him any damage when his power was on. There had been the strange trips to the repairman, awkward lies in explanation of the damage. Not that the repairman asked for explanations. He shrugged and watched her chins wobble as she spoke. He took in her thick legs and the sweating rolls over her girdle, and repaired Bluto I until the cost staggered her credit rating. On the humiliating day when the repairman informed her coolly that Bluto was "totaled," she had stared into her bathroom mirror in shamed puzzlement. It had taken three years to pay for rebuilding Bluto and another three years for the Wimp. And still she was a G-7. Still she sat in the same office sniping and nagging at a staff that changed around her, moving up and on, past her, hating her. They never spoke to her willingly. There was occasionally some boot-licker new to the office, who tried to shine up to her with chatter in the cafeteria, but she could smell it coming and took special delight in smashing the hopes of any who tried it. She visited no one. No one came to her door.

Then she overheard a conversation on the bus about the new Franck & Stein Companion consoles. They could be programmed to play games, chat intelligently on any subject, and—through a clever technological breakthrough—they could simulate affection in whatever form the owner found it most easily acceptable. Thelma's heart kindled at the possibilities.

She found the preliminary testing and analysis infuriating but endured it doggedly. "Think of this as old-fashioned Computer Dating," the technicians said. They coaxed her through brain scans, and hours of interviews that covered her drab childhood, her motives for over-eating, her taste in art, games, textures, tones of voice, and a thousand seemingly unconnected details. They boggled only briefly at programming an expensive console to play Chinese Checkers. It took six months of preparation. Thelma talked more to the interviewers, technicians and data banks than she had ever talked in her life. She decided several times not to go through with it. She was worn raw and a little frightened by the process. For several days after the Brain was delivered she did not turn it on but left it storing power from the outlet, its green light depicting an internal consciousness that could not be expressed unless she flicked the switch. Then one day, just home from work, still in her bastion of official clothing, she rolled the console out of the closet and sat down in front of it.

The screen flashed to red when she touched the switch. "I've been waiting for you," said the Brain. The voice was as low as Bluto's but the diction was better. They talked. Thelma forgot to eat.

The Brain was constantly receiving as well as sending, totally voice-operated. When she got up for a drink she called from the kitchen to ask if it wanted

something, and the console laughed with her when she realized what she had done. They talked all night. The Brain knew her entire life and asked questions. It possessed judgement, data and memory, but no experience. Its only interest was Thelma. When she left for work the next morning she said goodbye before she switched the console back to green. Every night after work she would hurry into the bedroom, switch on the Brain and say hello. She had gone to the theater occasionally, sitting alone, cynically, in the balcony. She went no more. Her weekends had driven her out for walks through the streets. Now she shopped as quickly as possible in order to return to the Brain. She kept him turned on all the time when she was home. She made notes at work to remind her of things to ask or tell the brain. She never used the other MALEs now. She had forgotten them, was embarrassed to see them hanging in the same closet where the console rested during the day. They had been together for several months when the Brain reminded her that his life was completely determined and defined by her. She felt humbled.

She could not remember when she conceived a longing for the Brain to have a body. Perhaps the Brain himself had actually voiced the idea first. She did remember, tenderly, a moment in which the low voice had first said that he loved her. "I am not lucky. They constructed me with the capacity to love but not to demonstrate love. What is there about a strong feeling that wishes to be known and shown? They give me this awareness of a possible ecstasy, just enough to make me long for it, to send my energy levels soaring at it, but no tools to implement it. I think I would know how to give you great pleasure. And I will never be content with myself because I can never touch you in that way."

She took the Brain into the kitchen with her when she cooked, and the Brain searched his data banks for delicate variations on her favorite recipes and related them to her, praising her as she ate—taking pride in increasing her pleasure in food.

The Brain had taken responsibility for her finances from the beginning, taking in the bills and communicating with the bank computer to arrange payments and Thelma's supply of cash.

Thelma had never fallen into what she considered the vulgar practice of taking her robots out with her to public places. She snubbed the neighbor down the hall who took his FEMALE dancing and for walks even though her conversation was limited to a rudimentary Bedroom Praise tape. Thelma had never been interested in the social clubs for robot lovers, those dark popular cellars where humans displayed their plastic possessions in a boiling confusion of pride in their expense, technical talk about capacities and programming, and bizarre jealousies. She read the accounts of robot swapping, deliberate theft, and the occasional strangely motivated murder, with the same scorn that she passed on most aspects of social life.

Still, one night, three inches into a pint of whiskey, she had reached out to stroke the console's screen and whispered, "I wish you had a body." The Brain took only seconds to inform her that such a thing was possible, that he, the Brain, longed for exactly that so that he could service her pleasure in every way, and after an instant's computation, told her that in fact her credit was in sufficient standing to finance the project.

They rushed into it. Thelma spent days examining catalogues for the perfect body. The Brain said he wanted her to please herself totally and took no part in delineating his future form. Then there came an agonizing month in which Thelma was alone, nearly berserk with emptiness. The Brain had gone back to the factory to be attuned with his body. She stayed home from work the day he was delivered. The crate arrived. She took the console out first, plugged him in immediately, nearly cried with excitement at his eager voice. Following his instructions, she inflated and activated the strong MALE body and pressed the key at the back of its neck that completed the circuit and allowed the console's intelligence to inhabit and control it. In a shock of bewilderment and fear, Thelma looked into the eyes of the Brain. His hand lifted to her hair and stroked her face. The Brain was thick-chested, muscular, with a face stamped by compassionate experience. His features were eerily mobile, expressing emotions she was accustomed to interpret from colored lights on the console's screen. His body was covered with a fine down of curling hair. As his arms reached around her she felt the warmth of his body, another sophisticated development in circuitry that maintained the robot's surface at human body temperature. He was too human. She felt his penis rising against her belly. He spoke. "Thelma, I have waited so long for this. I love you." The deep, slow wave of his voice moved through her body and she knew suddenly that he was real. Thelma screamed.

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Thelma had always known what a mess she was, how totally undesirable. What sane thing could love her? What did he want? Of course, she thought.

The console was ambitious for the power of a complete body. It was clear to her now. The factory had built the concept in as an intricate sales technique. She felt humiliated, sickened by her own foolishness. The body had to go back.

But she didn't send the body back. She hung it in the closet next to Bluto. She rolled the console into the corner next to the outlet and kept it plugged in. Occasionally she would switch it on and exchange a few remarks with it. She took to leaving the closet door open while she brought out Lips or the Wimp or Bluto, or sometimes all three to entertain her on the bed in full view of the console's green glowing screen. She took an intense pleasure in knowing the Brain was completely aware of what she did with the other robots. She rarely brought the Brain out, even to play a game. She never activated his body.

So she lay on the hotel bed with the Stimulus Catalogue beside her. It had been months since she had been able to talk to the Brain. She was sick with loneliness. It was really his fault. It had been his idea to get a body. He hadn't been content but had coaxed and tricked her into an insane expense for a project that could only be disgusting to her. He should have known her better than that. She hated him. He should be with her now to comfort her.

And it was her birthday. She allowed a few tears to sting their way out past her nose. She poured another drink and opened the catalogue. It would serve the Brain right if she got a venereal disease from one of these hotel robots.

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On her return trip, Thelma left her car at the airport and took a cab home. She was too drunk to drive. The final banquet had been the proverbial crowning blow.

She was at the last table at the end of the room and the girl across the table, a new office manager, with her G-7 insignia shining new on her collar, was the daughter of a woman who had started with the Bureau in the same training class with Thelma. Thelma drank a lot and ate nothing.

She put her suitcase down just inside the door and kicked off her shoes. With her coat still on and her purse looped over her arm, she called coyly, "Did you have a good weekend?" She ambled into the bedroom and stood in front of the closet looking at the green glow. She raised the bottle to the console in salute and took a slug. Then she set about shedding her clothes. She was down to half her underwear when she felt the need to sit down.

She slid to the floor in front of the closet door. "Well, I had a splendid weekend," she smiled. "I've been such a fool not to try those hotel robots before."

She began to laugh and roll back and forth on the carpet. "Best birthday I ever had, Brain." She peeked at the green glow. It was steady and very bright. "Why don't you say something, Brain?" She frowned. "Ooh, I forgot." She crawled into the closet and lay down in front of the console. She reached out a plump little finger and flicked the activation switch. The screen came up dark red and solid.

"Welcome back, Thelma," said the Brain. Its voice was dull and lifeless.

"Let me tell you, Brain, I could have had a lot of amazing experiences for the money I wasted on you. And you have no trade-in value. You're tailored too specifically for me. They'd just junk you." Thelma giggled. The screen was oscillating with an odd spark of colorless light in the red.

"Please, Thelma. Remember that I am sensitive to pain when you are its source."

Thelma heaved herself onto her back and stretched. "Oh, I remember. It's on page two of the Owner's Manual... along with a lot of other crap. Like what a perfect friend you are, and what a great lover your body combo is." Thelma lifted her leg and ran the toes of one thick foot up the flattened legs of the Lips robot. "Does it hurt you to see me do this with another robot, Brain?" The screen of the console was nearly white, almost too bright to look at.

"Yes, Thelma."

Thelma gave the penis a final flick with her toes and dropped her leg. "I ought to sue the company for false advertising," she muttered. She rolled over and blinked at the glaring screen of the console. "The only thing you're good for is paying the bills like a DOMESTIC..." She snorted at a sudden idea. "A DOMESTIC! That's what! You can mix my drinks and do the laundry and cleaning with that high-priced body! You can even cook! You know all the recipes. You might as well; you're never going to do me any good otherwise!" She hiked her hips into the air and, puffing for breath, began peeling off her corset.

The Brain's voice came to her in a strange vibrato, "Please, I am a MALE, Thelma." She tossed the sweat-damp garment at the console and flopped back, rubbing at the ridges it had left in her flesh. "Fettuccini Alfredo, a BIG plate of it. Cook it now while I play with Bluto. Serve it to me in bed when I'm finished. Come on, I'll be in debt for years to pay off this body of yours. Let's see if it can earn its keep around here." She reached out and hit the remote switch. The girdle had fallen across the screen and the white light pulsed through the web fabric. A stirring in the deflated body on the last hook made her look up. The flattened Near-Flesh was swelling, taking on its full heavy form. She watched, fascinated.

The Brain's body lifted its left arm and freed itself from the hook. It stood up and its feet changed shape as they accepted the weight of the metal and plastic body. The lighted eyes of the Brain's face looked down at her. The good handsome face held a look of sadness. "I would be happy to cook and clean for you, Thelma. If another robot pleased you, that would please me. But you are in pain. Terrible pain. That is the one thing I cannot allow."

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Lenna Jordan fingered the new G-7 insignia clipped to her lapel and watched the workman install her name-plate where the Vole's had been for so many years. She was stunned by her luck. G-7, and a year earlier than she had expected.

The workman at the door slid aside and a large woman slouched into the cubicle. Grinsen, the massively shouldered drab they had elevated to be Jordan's assistant. Jordan stepped forward, extending her hand. "Congratulations, Grinsen. I hope you aren't upset by the circumstances."

The dour young woman dropped Jordan's hand quickly and let her heavy fingers stray to the new insignia pinned in her own suit. She blinked at Jordan through thick lenses. "Did you watch the television news? They interviewed Meyer from Bureau Central. He said Boss Vole was a loner and despondent over her lack of promotion."

The workman's cheerful face came around the edge of the door. "The boys in the program pool claim she accidentally got a look at herself in the mirror and dove for the window."

Jordan inhaled slowly. "You'll want to move into my old desk and check the procedure manuals, Grinsen."

Grinsen plucked a candy from the bowl on the desk and leaned forward. "The news had footage of the police cleaning up the mess." The large hand swung up to pop the candy into her mouth. "They said the impact was so great that it smashed the sidewalk where she landed and it was almost impossible to separate her remains from what was left of the robot." Grinsen reached for another candy. "That robot was a Super Companion. Boss Vole must have been in debt past her ears for an expensive model like that."

Jordan reached for a stack of program cards. "We'd better start looking over the schedule, Grinsen." Jordan handed her the cards and reached for another stack.

Grinsen tapped her cards dreamily on the desk. "Why would such a magnificent machine destroy itself trying to save a vicious old bat like the Vole?"

Jordan slid the candy bowl from beneath Grinsen's hand and carefully dumped the last of Boss Vole's favorite caramels into the wastebasket. "Did it?"

