

Après un rêve

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*Dans un sommeil que charmait ton image
Je rêvais le bonheur, ardent mirage,
Tes yeux étaient plus doux, ta voix pure et sonore,
Tu rayonnais comme un ciel éclairé par l'aurore;*

Echoes of Grace singing, memories and emotions, clashed with the doctor's words. "I know you've signed the waivers, but I need a verbal confirmation. Do you understand this?"

Sylvie nodded. It was strange not to feel her hair, always so frizzy and buoyant, not following the motion a scant second too late.

"The uploading process will be fatal and irreversible. There is some risk, about one and a half percent, that it won't work." The doctor paused and picked up a pen. She added, "Won't work after the point where your body will have died, that is. Do you understand?"

A swallow, dry, and another nod. "What will happen in that case?"

"Your family will receive a payout of ten million francs CFA. Your body will not be available for a burial, unfortunately." The doctor looked abashed. "The results of the process are — ah, not pretty."

"I understand."

"One last bit, then. After the uploading process, successful or not, your blood, organs and tissue will be donated — or, well, sold — to a tissue bank in central

Africa. Your family will receive ten percent of this, and the Centre the other ninety. This is to help defray the cost of the process.”

Sylvie thought for a moment, rubbed her hand over her smooth-shaven head. “About how much will that be?”

“The cut to your family?” The doctor fiddled with her pen, twirling it across delicate dark fingers. “Lately, we’ve been getting about a hundred million francs, so again, about ten million. Not a bad payout, hmm?”

Not bad indeed. Sylvie had little love for her family, minus her brother, so the payout wasn’t a huge incentive, as it was for others. She just hoped Moussa wound up with a chunk of it.

Unlikely, given her mother.

She nodded her assent.

“So then. Your surgery is scheduled in one hour. You have fifteen minutes before prep, which means fifteen more minutes to back out if you should choose. I’m going to head back to the team and leave you be to think this over.” The doctor gestured to her right, “Dial zero on the phone on the desk if you wish to cancel.”

The doctor stood and leaned forward, offering her hand. Sylvie lifted herself out of her chair and accepted the handshake, feeling as though she needed to be careful of those delicate fingers. The grip was strong, though.

As the doctor slipped out of the room, Sylvie settled back into the chair. She closed her eyes against the sight of all the posters advertising the procedure. “Upload today!” they said. “Experience a life beyond need!” they promised. “Work without pressure! Fork at will!” they hollered. Everything was so loud, so loud.

She had them all memorized, anyway. Right now, she just wanted quiet. She just wanted to think of Grace.

Grace with her silvering hair.

Grace with her fair and smooth skin.

Grace with her liquid laughter and lovely singing.

They’d fallen in love within months, and shared only a scant few years together before being separated again. An impenetrable boundary of distance, of emulated sensorium and embodied flesh.

Grace's decision hadn't been Sylvie's. Uploading, the thought of uploading, made Sylvie's skin itch and eyes ache. To be removed from this world and sent to another, to the System, didn't appeal to her.

It did appeal to Grace.

Grace with her failing voice.

Grace with her deteriorating coordination.

Grace with her pain, her depression.

For Grace, it was a way to escape her body. That body that Sylvie loved so much, and was a prison to Grace. A voluntary procedure — “Help combat overpopulation!” the posters howled — but also a way to neatly sidestep the MS slowly claiming her body and mind.

After the upload, Grace had communicated with Sylvie through text, through mails sent to her terminal which she'd pour over at work. She begged Sylvie. *Come join, come upload*, she said. *The posters, they're all true, they're all right*.

The thought *still* made her skin itch and her eyes ache, but all the same, she kept dreaming of Grace. Dreaming of softer eyes, of a voice more sonorous. Her Grace shining like the dawn.

So she'd relented.

*Tu m'appelais et je quittais la terre
Pour m'enfuir avec toi vers la lumière,
Les cieux pour nous entr'ouvraient leurs nues,
Splendeurs inconnues, lueurs divines entrevues,*

Sylvie's mind was filled with Fauré, with that rolling, lilting theme. With Grace's voice.

“We're going to keep you awake, okay? We need to, in order to tell when the upload is complete, but you'll be under local anesthesia. It'll make you feel a little dreamy, may have visual disturbances.” The doctor's smile was kind. “Some report it to be enjoyable.”

“Okay. How long will the upload take?”

“The procedure will be about forty five minutes to prep you for upload, and then the upload will happen in two stages,” the doctor said. “You'll be uploaded to

a local node at our center, which will give you access to a waiting room of sorts for the System proper. The upload to the System will take several hours — it's a lot of data, you understand — so the waiting room will usually have you fork and the copy will be uploaded."

"Create a copy of myself and let that be uploaded while I watch," she murmured. Sylvie thought for a moment, "What about the copy that remains?"

"It's free to quit, like a program on your terminal quitting. But they — the, ah, sysadmins — usually request that it stay around in case the upload to the System gets interrupted for some reason."

"And what will I feel if things go wrong?"

The doctor hesitated, looked to her team. It was another team member, a man with a thick French accent, who responded. "We don't really know. The local node will pick up on it and alert us. Death just looks like death to us."

Sylvie nodded. Tried to nod, at least. She was firmly strapped down. "Alright."

There was a pinprick at the crook of her elbow. A feeling of coolness spread up her arm, into her chest. A tightness, there, and then a tightness along her neck. A brief moment of panic as she tried to flex her fingers.

"Starting the neuromuscular blocker. This will paralyze your voluntary muscles, so don't panic about the feeling," the anesthesiologist mumbled, distracted. He tapped her forearm, sending a pins-and-needles flash through the right half of her body. "But it doesn't numb you. That will be the next one, the anesthetic."

Sylvie attempted to speak, but only managed a grunt of assent.

The anesthesiologist nodded, "Good. Here it comes, then."

The coolness was replaced with a comfortable warmth.

Not warmth, she realized. Nothingness. Floatingness. Leaving-the-earth-ness. Gone-ness.

"Sylvie, can you hear me? You won't be able to speak or blink or nod, but can you try and take two quick breaths? It may be difficult. We'll intubate if necessary."

Sylvie obeyed. Or thought she did, at least. She couldn't tell if the breaths were actually happening. It seemed to be enough for the anesthesiologist, whose shadow across her vision bowed and stepped out of sight.

Time wandered.

Voices rang with the tenor of bells, though she could still understand them. Surgeons talking to technicians.

A dull, basso organ note of something grinding, her vision vibrating, blurring the sight of the light above the bed.

The light took the form of Grace, and Sylvie more readily gave in to the effects of the drug.

Grace with her angelic smile. Grace lifting her up, away from the earth. Grace running, running into the ring of that surgeon's lamp. Clouds, clouds parting.

The organ note screamed up through several octaves.

Calm, ringing voices.

That yearning song tinkling through her mind. She was unable to tell whether it came from herself, or from one of the techs. Or maybe from Grace. *Dans un sommeil que charmait ton image...* Tinkling and flowing. Rocking. Drunken. Drunken on dreams.

Minutes fled by. Hours. Days, perhaps. Always, in front of her, her angel. Pure white skin that contrasted beautifully against her own, cream spilled in coffee. Always lifting her up. How far did they have to go?

Grace was drifting away from her, receding.

The light flared in intensity. Somehow became black. A shining blackness amid a field of more blackness.

Tugging, pulling.

Prying.

A snap.

A sense of wrongness, of gravity.

Falling away. Layers of self peeling back, each successive shedding revealing something more raw, more primal. Molting. The boundary between her Self and the blackness complicating, fraying, fading.

Grace was gone, too, faded to nothing.

Come back! Sylvie shouted into the nothingness. Her fists, raw and exposed to their very core, to the concept of Fist sans physical representation, pounded at the blackness. Pounded at herself.

Come back! Come back! Grace! She wailed. Screamed. Sobbed.

Grace...

A whisper against building chords, Grace's sweet voice.

*Hélas! Hélas! triste réveil des songes
Je t'appelle, ô nuit, rends moi tes mensonges,
Reviens, reviens radieuse,
Reviens ô nuit mystérieuse!*

The team stood still. There was no written protocol as to what one should do while the local node processed the upload, but they always remained silent. The doctor held her breath every time.

A small pinging noise. The local readout flashed red.

Shoulders sagged around the room.

"Error in processing upload." The tinny speaker sounded impersonal. Perhaps it was designed that way to play down the loss. "Irrecoverable data corruption. Please check all contacts before continuing or contact System support for a technician for a full rig inspection."

"Well." The anesthesiologist's voice, so human, contrasted with the words from the speaker. "That's that, then."

"That's that," the doctor echoed. She sighed and backed away from Sylvie's body. It was empty, now. A husk. "I'll start the paperwork and call her family and the insurance company. Get the payout processed as soon as possible."

The other team members nodded. None of them looked happy.

"Go on, get her cleaned up and sent to the handlers." She trudged out of the room slowly, her feet dragging. Pulling off her gloves, one by one, she added, "At least someone will get something out of this. Alas."

Prayers began around the corpse.