

## ORCUS – A RIGHT TO DIE

The Orcus Right to Die Company offered an excellent service. Technicians visited clients at home, or at a place of their choosing, and conducted their business for a reasonable up-front fee. Payment plans were not available. Harold Reams had worn their glossy brochure dull with reading and smeared the stock models with moisture from his palms.

‘Mr Reams, are you certain you wish to begin the procedure?’ The white-clad technician moved close and the smell of latex curled in Harold’s nose.

‘Yes.’ Harold nodded consent. The stained throw behind his head crept further down the back of his favourite chair. The only thing missing was Bourbon, his cat. He’d found a home for the insufferable creature just last week after eleven years. As much as it had pained him to say goodbye, he’d done the right thing.

‘I’ll numb the skin over the vein in your arm, Mr Reams. I’ll use a spray and it will be a little cold, but you won’t feel the first needle going in.’

‘All right.’ Harold smiled, he liked how they called him by name, reminding him, even now, that he was still a valued customer.

‘I’ve prepared the initial syringe, Mr Reams. This is the drug that will put you under. It’s just like an operation, you will start to feel sleepy and drift off. If at any time, any time at all, even in the last moment before you fall asleep, you change your mind, Mr Reams, just say *no*, or *stop*, and we won’t administer the final syringe. Nobody will think

badly of you for it. You have nothing to prove. Do you understand?’

He nodded.

‘You need to tell me you understand, Mr Reams.’

‘Yes, I understand.’

The corner of the technician’s eye twitched a little behind his glasses.

‘I’m administering the first syringe now. Are you sure you wish to go ahead, Mr Reams?’

‘Yes.’

Harold did not feel the small scratch as the hypodermic pierced his skin. His mind fogged over and his eyes fluttered closed as he searched for something to think about in his final lucid moments. He thought of how Bourbon sat on his chest in bed at night, her head nestled under his chin and the vibration of her purr thrumming against his throat. Harold tried to smile at the memory, but his face wouldn’t move.

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A special silence exists in the mind. It is a hum or buzz that vibrates until the listener believes it an actual noise. Harold Reams recognised the noise and thought it strange because he was dead. And the smell, like the inside of a fresh garbage bag, all new, and plastic, and out of place. The air tasted of body lotion.

Harold frowned. His face could move again, another impossibility for dead people. Had he told them to stop? Had he not gone through with it? The sting of tears made the back of his throat hurt.

He *must* have told them to stop, but why wasn't he in his armchair? Why did he feel like he was laid out on a slab and covered him in darkness?

His bowels flopped like a slippery fish and prompted his voice to claw its way up his throat.

'I'm alive!'

The harsh fluorescent light made him screw his eyes shut when he hadn't realised they were open.

'Mr Reams.' The baritone sound of his name caught Harold's attention. 'As far as the world is concerned, you *are* dead.'

'What?'

'At six this evening, we killed you.'

'I don't understand.'

The voice became the bespectacled figure of a man dressed in a well-tailored, dark grey suit. A large gold signet ring protruded from his left little finger.

'At this moment, Mr Reams, a lifelike silicone model of your corpse is on its way to an open casket viewing booked for tomorrow morning. Obituaries are flying through fibre optic cables. Your solicitor is preparing to receive your death certificate before executing your will. Do you think you could sit up, Mr Reams?'

Hard heeled brogues clicked on the tiled floor as the man came closer.

'I...' Harold tensed his stomach muscles and pushed himself upright with one arm.

'Excellent. You might still be a little weak for a few of your hours.'

Harold glanced down at his body, clad in a crisp white gown. Below the hem, his legs had been freshly shaved.

‘Why am I here?’

‘Because you were tired of life and craved death.’

‘But I’m not dead.’

‘You might be breathing, but you have ceased to exist. Your old life and all your worldly concerns are no more.’

‘Just like that?’

‘You paid us to get rid of it.’

‘To get rid of *me*.’

‘A minor distinction.’ The man flicked his wrist waving away Harold’s comment. ‘Don’t worry about it now. Rest, eat, regain your strength.’ He moved across to a white wall and ran a hand over an integrated sensor. A small motor whirred behind the panel and the wall opened, revealing a room with a dining table and chair. A smorgasbord of dishes covered the table.

‘You must be hungry, Mr Reams.’

‘I’m dead, but not dead?’ Harold swung his legs over the side of the narrow bed. He slid forward until the chill of tiles touched his bare feet.

‘That’s right, Mr Reams, dead but not dead. Be careful when you stand.’

Harold nodded but staggered when he transferred his weight. He steadied himself a moment, grasping the bed.

‘What have you done?’

‘I did say you might be a little wobbly. The residual effects of the drug will wear off soon. Here, take my arm.’

The man moved beside him and Harold clutched at the well-tailored sleeve, hard muscle bunched beneath the fabric. Together, they walked the few steps into the dining room and Harold dropped into a straight-back chair. The metal legs screeched against the tiles.

‘I’ll leave you to eat. Please, don’t be shy, it will help.’ The man smiled, revealing a row of neat little teeth too small for his mouth, like milk teeth.

Harold watched the man disappear into the first room. ‘Thank you,’ he said, but the wall panel had closed.

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From behind a protective two-way glass, two grey suits observed the man who had been Harold Reams devour half a fried chicken.

‘He’s perfectly healthy,’ the first one said.

‘As expected. The Doctor does excellent work. It is easy to convince these people they are better off dead. Their emotions are so fragile. When he held my arm, I felt it. There is no substance to them.’ He touched at his sleeve and caught the faint scent of sweat particular to Harold. His lip curled.

‘Have you submitted the forms yet?’

‘No,’ the man removed thick, black-rimmed glasses. Shadowed pits in place of eyes continued to study Harold through the glass. The spectacle lenses blinked holographically in his hand. ‘I thought we might fatten him up first, to ensure the measurements are correct.’

‘Good. We don’t want to send inferior stock.’

‘There is our reputation, finest purveyors of pure protein and all that.’

The first man grinned, his glasses flickered to simulate the scrunching at the corners of his eyes. His little teeth, fluorescent in the dim light, glinted mustard-yellow with digestive enzyme.

‘You’re making me hungry,’ the words slipped between the pucker of his thin lips as he sucked at the secretions. A slight shudder ran through his narrow frame. ‘How old is this one?’

‘Forty-five.’

‘Perfectly cured. Sweet meat, then.’

‘He’ll fetch a good price.’

‘A few more like him and we can be rid of this dreadful place.’

The man replaced his glasses and settled them on the bridge of his nose. He showed his teeth, ‘It shouldn’t be long. The Doctor is already working.’

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