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about 1,000 words

Sorry, Wrong Lungs

by Diorgo Jonkers

Julian Styn wakes up in what smells and sounds like a hospital. His eyes hurt and he struggles to open them. In the darkness he can hear Beth, his wife, talking to someone.

"Do they know who set off the bomb?" she asks.

"It was a group of androids. They want more rights, as if we haven't given them enough already," a man's voice says. He sounds tired. "They also want people to stop using artificial organs and limbs. They're afraid we'll replace them."

"Doesn't that make Julian a target, now that he has artificial lungs?" Beth asks with concern.

"That's something you'll have to ask the police, I'm afraid."

"What 'artificial lungs'?" Julian thinks to himself.

He finally manages to open his eyes. He sees Beth and the man, a doctor.

"Beth," Julian says.

"Hey," she says, smiling. She holds his hand in hers.

"Hello, Mister Styn. I'm doctor Gordon. How do you feel?"

"Chest hurts. Feels like a fat cat is lying on my chest."

After a few breaths he asks, "What happened? I thought I heard you say I have fake lungs."

Beth shoots the doctor a quick glance.

"There was an explosion at your workplace," the doctor says.

"What? When?" he asks shocked.

"Yesterday. You and over fifty people were rushed here."

Julian asks Beth, "Did anyone die?"

She nods her head.

"Oh, God." After a moment he asks, "Who?"

"The names haven't been released yet. I'm sorry," the doctor says. He gives Julian time to absorb the news, then continues, "Your chest was severely damaged. We had to replace your lungs with artificial ones."

Beth squeezes Julian's hand. He uses his free hand to lightly prod his chest, half expecting to feel metal.

"Operation was a success, I take it?" He forces a smile.

"Yes," the doctor says with a solemn expression.

"But now you're gonna give me bad news."

"During the chaos, we gave you our last pair of lungs, unaware that they were reserved for another patient. If we'd known then we would've hooked you up to an external lung until

next week, when we get new ones."

"So the other patient's gonna get an external?"

"Unfortunately she's in a fragile state and we can't operate twice on her. We have to replace her lungs within the next two days." He pauses, then continues while running his hand through his hair, "What I'm about to ask you is not an easy thing."

"You want me to give up my lungs to save her?" Julian says.

"Yes. The lungs became yours as soon as we put them in you. If you decide to go through with it then we'll hook you up to an external until next week. You'll have to stay here for the week. The hospital will cover all the bills."

The doctor pauses, then says, "I have to warn you, removing your lungs again so soon is a big risk."

Beth says to Julian, "I'll support your decision, but I don't want to lose you. It's not fair." Julian squeezes her hand.

"What's the woman's name?" he asks the doctor.

"Lucy. Lucy Shardo. Would you like to meet her?"

Julian lies in silence for a moment, wondering if he should meet her. Does he want to stare into eyes that might haunt him forever if he decides not to give her the lungs?

"Maybe it'll be better to meet her after everything's done," Beth says. He nods.

"OK. I have to get going," the doctor says. "We need your decision by tomorrow morning. I'll be back later." He walks out.

"It's not our fault they made a mistake," Beth says. She leans forward and lies her head on the pillow next to his.

He is silent for a minute, contemplating the hand fate dealt him.

"I've always thought of myself as a pretty decent person. I've fantasised about saving people's lives. Now, given the chance to save someone, I'm afraid," he says.

"Don't ever doubt if you're decent, and there's nothing wrong with being afraid."

"I'm not even sure if it's fear, or selfishness. I wish I didn't have to decide."

"Then don't. Let the hospital find another solution."

"What if they can't? It's making me despise myself." He imagines himself sitting in a pub with his friends a few months from now, having a good time, then the despise will creep up on him and spoil his day.

He thinks about the androids. He feels anger and hatred towards them, but surprisingly he has a greater feeling of pity for them. Some of them are so desperate to be human, while most humans have no qualms about replacing their own body parts with artificial ones. Hell, there are even television shows, magazines and websites devoted to modified people.

He remembers an article he read about androids who created their own organic lungs, just so they could experience breathing air the way we do.

How long, he wonders, before the difference between humans and androids become blurred? What will separate us, if

anything at all?

He pokes his chest again. For the first time he notices a booklet lying on the bed. It is the manual for his lungs. It looks like their washing machine's manual.

He thinks, "I'm more than a washing machine. More than an android."

He decides then, despite his fears, to give up his lungs to save Lucy. He hugs Beth and she looks into his eyes. She can tell what he has decided. They hold each other for a long time.

END