

The Cure

(a Parrish Plessis story)

by

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Quoll died under his bed in the dormitory.

I found him there, picked him up and carried him outside to the incinerator.

The rest of the ferals watched me dry eyed and silent. No tears from them. Death happened often enough around here and this kid was from Mo-Vay - one of the ugly halfings already living on loan.

Glida-Jam, the oldest of the Mo-Vay's, pointed to the discharge and swelling in his neck. 'What's that Parrish?'

Glida's speech was improving quickly. Not surprising. Her desire to learn bordered on obsession. She spent all her time on language interactives. The younger ones survival depended on her communication – none of them had real language.

Like Quoll.

I'd rescued him and Glida and some others from a living hell only a few clicks away and set them up in a barracks style living with a bunch of local kids. Now he'd died from what looked like an infected neural interface implant.

'It's an infection. From a dirty jack,' I said thickly.

The horror on her face ripped me. Glida had lost Roo, the first boy who'd ever looked at her, because I couldn't keep him safe. Now she'd lost one of the children she cared for as her own family.

I put my hand on her shoulder. 'I'll make sure it doesn't happen again. I promise.'

I knew who was responsible for fitting the dirty jack but stopping them wasn't just a matter of getting in the face of a backroom operator and telling him he was out of order. The Cure was a

bunch of shady but organised medics who fitted most of the bio-ware you could buy in the Tert.

They held hands and scratched balls with a guy called Stenhouse who supplied their hardware.

Together they formed some serious opposition.

I'd always had an issue with their practises but as my best friend and ex-lover Teece kept telling me

– it was a battle I couldn't win. Sim-stim and Vreal helped keep The Tert's fragile economy afloat. If I

upset the balance of it by going on a crusade, I'd have Gigi, the Tert's banker, cutting off my credit.

No credit, no keeping the barracks alive. No barracks and the ferals would end up back in the attics.

This...problem was one I knew I should approach with some finesse.

Parrish Plessis, warlord, was not known for her finesse.

More like her mad berserkers. I could feel one inside me now, welling up at the sight of the small

body and Glida's distress.

I placed Quoll gently on the ground, slid back the grate and stoked the fire. When it was roaring I

thrust his body in there. His marsupial tail fell back out like a plea. I used my knife to push it in.

There was no place for burials in The Tert unless you wanted to take a trip onto the waste.

No funerals.

No kind words.

Only the dumb misery on Glida's face and an ungovernable rage settling on my chest.

I watched the smoke plume and then die down. With the taste of cremation in my throat I sought my weapon collection for solace.

Raul Minoj, weapons dealer, had recently installed a gun safe in my rooms. For being such a good

customer and all round nice grrl he threw in a couple of presents. With everything my life had

become I hadn't even had a chance to look at them properly. Right now I craved the feel of

something cool and hard and lethal. Maybe it would ease my guilt. Hold back the dark.

My private war with sim-stim had a lot of history. My mum, Irene, was addicted and I knew what power stims had given my step-dad over her.

The Mo-Vay kids I'd rescued had little enough of anything. I'd interfered with their lives, bought

them to a strange place, and now I had to do something about keeping them safe in it.

I actually had an allergy to the word responsibility but somehow it kept finding me - by the truckload.

Outside my villa door two bored Muenos played knife games. I'd had some good security installed – the best around this tawdry villatropolis – but Teece insisted on guards as well.

Profile, he explained. You're the boss, Parrish, you gotta act like it.

I let myself in to find Merry 3#, my neurotic holo P-diary, dancing in her spanky high heels across the old blood stains on the floor. I'd inherited these rooms from a gang lord, and all the bad memories that hung around in them. I lived with them as a reminder of what life could be like when someone owned you.

'Thinking of going into acting?' I asked.

She pulled a bitchy face.

It was our private joke. Media/entertainment were dirty words between us. But hey, that story would take a Flux to tell.

'Get hold of Lize for me,' I told her.

I went into my bedroom and unlocked the gun case. The new pieces were beautiful. A Sprag semi-auto and a handcrafted Beretta copy. I handled them while I tried to forget how quickly Quoll had burnt.

Lize was a bounty hunter who owed me a debt. She'd taken on a contract to kidnap me for a voodoo bitch named Leesa Tulu. Things hadn't quite worked out for Lize. I stopped short of killing her and sent her on a short holiday until things cooled off. I didn't bear grudges against people on commission.

I also didn't forget.

I couldn't risk taking the Muenos with me on the visit I was planning. The Tert politics was as fragile as its economy. I had to be careful what acrimony I invited. Right now I was working at building trust

between the Muenos and the northside punters. Lize would have to do instead.

'Paa-rrish!'

I slipped the Sprag's strap over my shoulder and went out to my living room. Lize's face shimmered in the holo frame. She didn't look happy to hear from me.

'I thought we'd squared things off?' she said.

'We're square. But I've got work for you.'

'What if I don't want to do it?'

'Then we're not square.'

She sighed heavily. 'You were the worst days work I ever did Parrish.'

'Meet me at Hein's in full kit. Unlikely there'll be any killing. Just make sure you look good.'

'Pity,' she said and cut the link.

The chained dog flouro on the villa roof of Hein's bar may have lost the ruby lights in its collar but it didn't deter the crowd. The place was filled with the usual pm detritus – glassy-eyed and more interested in the sport feed from OneWorld than conversation. Larry Hein, owner and fashion victim, was thumping the 'tronic panel of his glass washer and swearing.

I waited for Lize at the south end of the bar with my back to the wall.

Feng habit.

She barely raised an eyebrow from the regulars when she arrived but Larry stiffened and stalked over to me.

'Trouble, Parrish?'

Larry was my broker. He loved chiffon and all things floaty, except when he was horny, and then he wore latex. You could always tell when Larry had a hot date.

He also ran a slick holocaust drill to make the bar safe when trouble was brewing. Larry was foremost a businessman.

'Lize and I are planning a visit to The Cure.'

'Teece know about this?'

'Not until it's too late. Right Larry?'

Larry shrugged. 'He's looking for you. Says it's important.'

'Yeah well so's this.'

The truth was I was avoiding Teece on account of some personal stuff. 'Stuff' scared me more than death and snakes.

I told Lize who we were visiting and why.

She screwed up her face.

Her frown wasn't sympathy for Quoll. Lize didn't suffer sympathy.

'So let me get this clear. I'm just here for the purpose of intimidation?' she asked.

'Yeah. Watch my back and look like you'll follow through.'

'How much?'

'If everything goes smoothly – two hundred.'

She flexed and rotated her third arm - the heat-resistant one that operated the firestormer - like she was hoping it wouldn't.

We took a Pet to the party. I was not a fan of using bio-mek transport, preferring to walk mainly. But I didn't want word to spread ahead of us and sometime you just gotta get places in a hurry.

The Cure's med-centre was an overly glamorous name for two villas patched together, housing three crude labs and a ground floor office.

The patient queue often spilled outside and down the nearest alleyway.

I told Lize to prep ahead. She warmed up the firestormer and I re-checked my ammo.

Her grin was turning into something cold and glittery. I liked what I saw.

'Do some damage if you like,' I told her. 'These bastards can afford it.'

We were out and parading our hardware in seconds. The queue of punters dispersed like dust into a vac leaving only the hired muscle guarding the door.

When Lize charcoaled their toes, they scarpered as well.

No need to burst through the office door. It was wide open.

I dropped the Sprag onto the desk, tip of the barrel straight at the chest of the human receptionist while Lize did a little décor melt.

'Tell the boys, I'd like to buy them a coffee,' I said.

She kept cool enough. I guess sangfroid come with the job description. 'You'll have to wait. They're in procedures?'

The uhh? on my face must have been obvious.

'They're o-p-e-r-a-t-i-n-g,' she spelt out.

I thought about nuking her for the insult but let it pass. She hadn't killed Quoll. She'd just taken his cred.

'Where's the boss?'

She pulled a ferocious face and pointed up the stairs. 'If you go into a sterile environment you'll cause an infection for the patients.'

I laughed dangerously at that.

'Lize. My back.'

I kicked open the crudely fashioned double doors at the top.

Two medics and a couple of assistants were busy fitting neural interfaces or upgrades to a string of punters. In the centre of the room a unit hummed and sprayed a fine mist into the air. I'd seen something like it before in Mo-Vay. Loyl Daac reckoned it was a portable steriliser - the latest giz for labs.

I shot it in the guts.

Both the medics cancelled the charge on their sculpting wands. One of them, a tall dude with neat hair and too-shiny boots poking out from his gown, looked terrified.

The other tore his mask away in fury.

'What do you want Parrish?'

Yan and I went back away. In my first few months in The Tert he'd offered me a free fit for sex. I didn't do contra deals where my body was concerned. Besides the guy looked like a sick goat. When he tried to pressure me I could have taken real offence, but I understood that someone who looked like him had to use strategies, so I just broke the fingers on his o-p-e-r-a-t-i-n-g hand.

'You've got a problem,' I sang.

He tugged his beard. 'What's that?'

'Me. One of my kids has just been to visit you. He's dead now.'

He frowned, surprised. 'You mean the hairy one with the...the...'

'The tail, yeah. Now talk Yan. Stop me shooting you. Why did you fit him with a dirty connection?'

I stepped towards him to disperse the hovering image of the rot around Quoll's wound.

'I didn't. The polymer was quite clean. He must have had an allergic reaction to the adhesion proteins we use to maximise compatibility of the implants.'

'Allergic? How?'

He gave a short laugh. 'You'd have to talk to Ike del Morte. Something in the gene splicing he's done has probably altered their bio-chemistry.'

Ike del Morte was dead and Yan knew it. I'd strangled him and crushed him against a fibre optic mutation that had leeches the blood out of him. The reason? To stop him making any more Quoll's. Halflings with marsupial tails and scale and hair in all the wrong places.

'Of course it's altered them. They look like freaking animals.' I tried not to shout.

My finger trembled on the Sprag's trigger. It would be so easy to waste Yan. But there were too many punters here as witness, and I knew what the consequences of my impulse would be.

This part of The Tert didn't need another war. Nor did I.

'Cell adhesion and interface compatibility aren't the only thing they're going to have problems with.

My guess is their chemistry is totally freaked. Ike's never had good track record with longevity for his human experiments,' he said.

I winced. The thought had been grating at the back of my mind for a while. Now Yan had voiced it I

couldn't pretend. The Mo-Vay's were probably going to die young. 'No more fit ups – to any of them.'

'Sure, Parrish, if that's what you want, we'll turn them away. Everyone knows how important these... fauna are too you. But it won't stop them if they want it. Hell, you can get this shit done anywhere,' he sneered.

He was right of course. Punters only paid for Yan because it was normally safer but you could buy DIY upgrade kits in Plastique.

'If you had any brains you'd go talk to the person who gave him the cred to do it.'

My jaw dropped. I hadn't even thought to ask Glida how Quoll had afforded it. The Cure's expertise didn't come free.

Yan didn't bother to hide his gloat at my stupidity.

Enjoy it, I thought. People like Yan were far less of a problem when their wounds were salvaged.

'Don't do any more and I won't bother you again,' I said.

'Don't come here again, Parrish. Or you'll have the bother.'

Lize was longing against the wall near the front door, playing eyeball chicken with the receptionist.

'Drink?' I said.

She looked surprised but nodded.

We found a bar nearby. I didn't want to go back to Hein's right away, I couldn't get any thinking room there.

I bought two rums and paid her the cred.

She didn't offer any back. A deal was a deal, no matter how easy the job turned out to be. Instead she slugged back the shot and called for the bottle.

'What's on your mind, Plessis?'

Maybe she was smarter than she looked.

'What do the punters around here think of the Mo-Vay kids?'

'Not much I guess. They look like rats but nobody'd be fool enough to say so to you.'

'How d'ya mean?'

'The stories. Some say you did a trade with the devil to bring them back here. Some say you sacrificed Roo to a bitch Loa to save them. Some say they're the kids you're never going to have. Whatever the truth is...it will have cost you. It always does.'

'Howso?'

She shrugged, guzzling straight from the bottle in deep practised gulps without offering me any.

'You invest...' she drained the last of it, 'you're...wassa word...vulnerable.'

I waited for her to throw up, or head spin. But apart from the slight slur she seemed sober enough.

She methodically disassembled the firestormer and slotted it into toggles on her body armour.

'Thanks for the drink,' she said, and left.

'Where did Quoll get the money, Glida?'

She was slumped over her dim net-viewer, reading and chewing her lip in concentration.

'Do not know.' She said the words precisely.

I didn't push it. Her thin body seemed emptied by fatigue and grief.

'You need to sleep,' I said.

'No thank you.' She kept her eyes on the screen.

Frustration drove me to Lu Chow's where I ordered a mockoff and a shawarma. My cred was better than good at Lu's and she always threw in a little extra. Today it was dough soaked in burnt caramel.

'Teece is looking for you.'

I stuffed the dough into my mouth. 'Uh huh. Well, you didn't see me.'

As I ate I thought about whether I believed Yan. He had every reason to want to upset me. Hurting a Mo-Vay kid was a sure fire way to do that.

'Lu?'

'What's itching you Parrish?' She re-filled my mock-off, wiping the lip of her jug with a dirty towel and a sarcastic flourish.

'Who hates me the most, Lu?'

She rolled her eyes. 'Can't you ask me something easy?'

'Yeah. When you gonna get some proper tea? This stuff tastes like dog fur,' I said.

'And you wanna know who hates you most,' she huffed turning her back on me.

I fell to compiling a full mental list of Parrish haters until it got too long and too depressing. I switched to watching the passing traffic for distraction.

They were mostly regular Torleys punters on their way to Hein's bar to drink, or to Shadoville to trade, or to the Strip for sex. None of them knew a kid had just burned in their breathing space.

None of them would care.

Only me. Glida and me.

Around Lu Chow's the huddle of food vendor's and hawkers were in the lull of late day. At Jack-Knife's pawn stall I noticed someone familiar – or something. A dude in a set of shiny, narrow-toed fashion boots.

'Lu?' I called the sulky food vendor over from her cooka. 'You seen that guy over at Jack-Knife's stall before? The one with the chi-chi boots.'

She gave a casual glance. 'Yeah. Sure. He's that medic. Works for Yan.'

I looked harder at his neat hair and tall, thin body; remembered him standing alongside Yan in the surgery.

He pocketed cred in exchange for something and left.

I followed him on instinct.

He left Torleys-proper and wound his way slowly to the barracks. He went inside and came out a few minutes later with Cus-Cus, one of the Mo-vay's. He handed the feral a wad of cred.

I only took me three steps before I got him by the throat. 'What are you doing?'

He tried to kick me in the crotch and run but I shoved the nose of the Beretta-copy between his ribs and twisted it.

He froze.

'Why are you giving her money?'

'N-no reason,' he gasped.

'You work for Yan don't you?'

He nodded.

The blackness that had been circling me since I found Quoll, swarmed. I shot five holes into the shiniest of his chi-chi boots - one through each toe.

He didn't scream straight away but when he started it brought out a crowd.

I didn't even notice them. I levelled the pistol at his heart and wondered if I would need to cut his arms and legs from his body to fit him in the incinerator.

'Parrish! STOP!'

The voice pierced my thoughts like a pickaxe.

Teece?

'Parrish. Listen to me. I've been looking everywhere for you. Road's behind this.'

Road Tedder. Drug distributor in Plastique. Parrish hater. Competitor.

'He wants to start trouble.'

'Give me proof, Teece,' I said hoarsely.

He thrust Glida between the medic and me so that the tip of the gun pressed on her forehead. Her eyes were swollen from crying.

Teece shook her arm. 'Tell her.'

'The man...Road...gave me speed. He said it would help me learn. I-I didn't trust him. I sold it and gave Quoll the money.'

'Why?'

'Quoll couldn't talk even though I tried to teach him. I thought an implant would help him better. All the others...' she gestured to the Torleys ferals crowding around us, 'they've got them.'

'Why didn't you tell me that?'

Her face crumbled. 'Thought you'd kill me,' she whispered.

I pushed her into the shelter of Teece's arms and kept the pistol pointing steadily at the medic.

'What were you doing then?'

He was crying. Blood leaked from his boot onto the pavement. 'I w-wanted them to have the money b-back. I felt bad about the kid.'

'You kill him, Parrish. Road gets what he wants anyway.'

Teece's words fired light into the heart of the blackness that gripped me.

I dropped my pistol.

And faced my cost.