Proxy — Temet Nosce

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Decent Money

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About this Piece

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CHAPTER ONE

Proxy — Temet Nosce

'Good morning Ada.'

'Good morning Serge.'

'Big day ahead?' the security guard at the front desk asked, looking up from his book and gesturing at the extra-large coffee in Ada's hand.

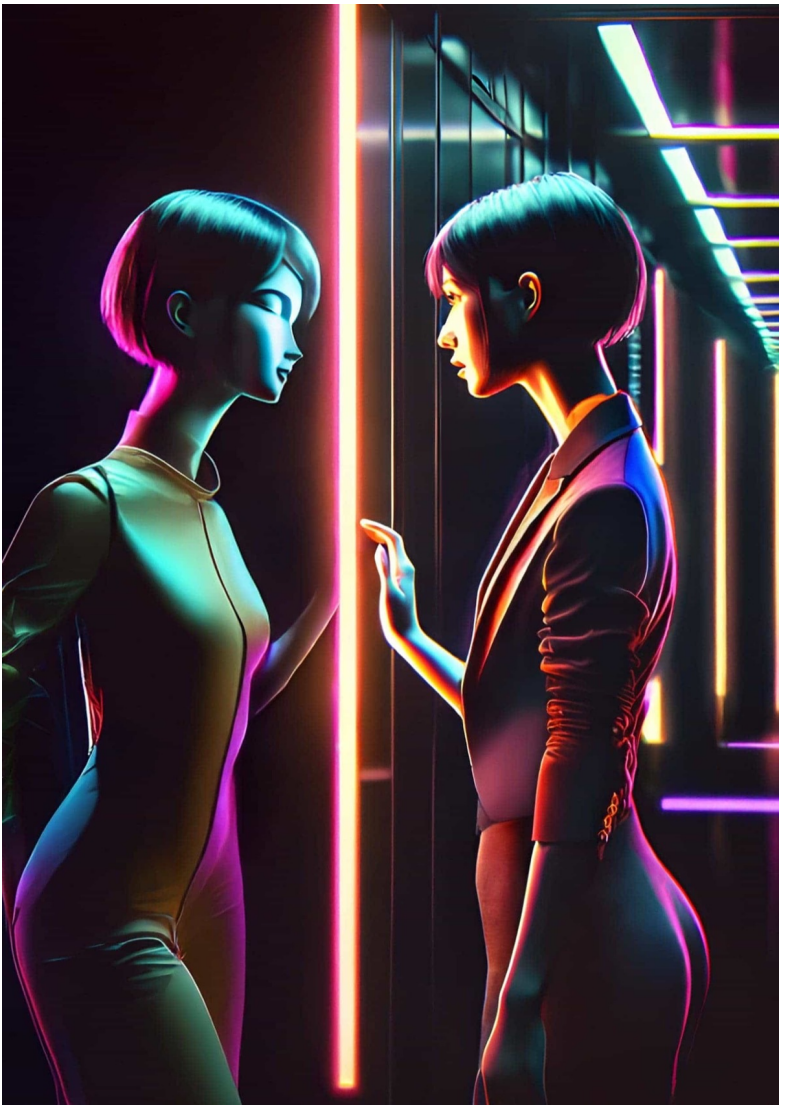
'Always,' Ada said, passing her hand over the sensor. The gate's light switched to green and gave a confirmatory beep.

The security guard waved her through. 'Good luck up there,' Serge said, winking kindly.

'Thanks,' she said with a smile. 'Have a nice day.'

Ada walked down the short hall, pressed the 'up' button, and stepped into the elevator. She never left the elevator again.

She pressed the top button for the 95th floor, and the elevator started moving. At the 21st floor, the elevator stopped, another person stepped in, and the doors closed. Ada briefly looked up but didn't recognize them. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed her new companion seemed agitated. They were frantically fidgeting with their smartphone as though trying to do something quickly.



Ada couldn't see what they were doing with such urgency, but their nervous energy made her feel uncomfortable. She tried to catch a glance of their reflection in the elevator's mirrored walls, but their features were indistinct and oddly plain.

Then it dawned on her. When the person stepped into the elevator, they hadn't selected a floor. It felt like her heart stopped as her stomach lurched in panic. No, not just panic. The elevator had come to a sudden stop, making her feel strangely weightless for a moment before the lights turned off, plunging them into darkness. A moment later, the dim-red emergency lights activated and she could see again. In the darkness, she could barely make out the other passenger's silhouette, but that was because where a person should be, there was just a human-shaped empty space, like a hole in reality. Though she couldn't make out their details, she could tell the black figure was moving towards her. Before she had a chance to move or scream, they had pinned her against the back wall and covered her mouth with their hand.

'If you want to live, don't struggle.' The voice didn't sound human. It sounded like it was digitally distorted to resemble the guttural growl of a predatory animal learning to speak. They reached for something with their other hand and brought it up to Ada's eye. 'Keep your eyes open.' The deep voice growled, and a blinding light shone in Ada's eye.

After a few bright flashes, it felt like her skeleton was pulled out through the front of her body, and then an unnerving feeling of falling just before sleep. Everything went dark again.

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When she woke up, the elevator was still dimly lit by the emergency lighting. She frantically looked around for the other person, but she was alone.

The button for the 95th floor was no longer lit, but the button for the ground floor was. When the elevator reached the ground, the regular lights turned back on. The sudden brightness blinded her as she shielded her eyes to give them a moment to adjust. To her horror, as she looked between her fingers, she saw another person in the wall's reflection. It felt like a lump was caught in her throat. The reflection wasn't another person, it was her, but not her body. Worse, it was a NoBody.

Her business outfit had been replaced with a plain beige skintight outfit, black lines running down her limbs and the sides of her torso. She moved closer to the reflection of her face, which was now just a featureless mask, as though the basic shape of a face had been smoothed over to remove it of all significant features and character. It was the face of everyone, but no one. Set in the depressions, where her eyes should be, were two black empty holes blankly staring back at her. She looked like one of those generic mannequins in a shop-front window or an expressionless crash-test dummy. Not even her hair remained. Ada didn't believe what she was seeing at first, so she turned to the other walls terrified at what she might see, half hoping that the reflection was only wrong on one wall, but no matter where she turned, she was surrounded by her worst nightmare: a NoBody.

As she gathered herself, she began to understand what happened: she had just been the victim of identity theft. She had heard

stories of it on the feeds, but it felt like something that happened to someone else. Once an identity was stolen, the victim was allocated a temporary skin. These featureless skins were colloquially known as NoBodies. The motive to steal someone's identity was typically to steal their wealth, but it wasn't that the victim's bank account was drained by the thief. The problem was that it was no longer their bank account. The thief didn't need to drain it because the funds now belonged to them.

She could feel all the emotions of panic, but her new body remained outwardly expressionless, with no tears to cry. Her internal experience was her true-self encased in a NoBody shell, but not skin-tight as it appeared out the outside. It was suffocatingly close, but with a few millimetres of space all around, like it was one size too big for her. At first, she thought the extra space was a small mercy, providing a little bit of breathing room, but instead, it became a constant reminder that she was imprisoned in the smallest possible cage. As claustrophobia gripped her she rushed out of the elevator for fresh air.

After she exited, she made her way to the front desk where Serge was keeping watch, and she called out to him, 'Ṣeɨgè! Ṣeɨgè! You have to help.' She stopped short, surprised at the sounds coming out of her mouth, no longer her own voice. It was replaced with a monotone drone that wasn't distinctly feminine or masculine, and stripped of emotion. In her mind's voice, what she said was pleading and panic-stricken, but her distraught calls to Serge came out emotionless. Most shocking of all, Serge's name was garbled like glitched audio. It didn't sound anything like language.

Serge hadn't heard her soft voice but turned to the approaching footsteps. When he saw the NoBody lurching towards him, he threw his book aside, scrambled out of his seat, and reached for his nightstick, a short thin metallic rod tipped with electrodes.

'Hey! What are you doing here? You're not allowed in the secure area. Get out,' he said with a raised and stern voice, scowling at the approaching NoBody, and gesturing to the exit.

The NoBody continued towards Serge, reaching out to him. Serge pushed it away and held his electrified nightstick threateningly. It seemed to hesitate before approaching again speaking in its monotone voice punctuated with garbled nonsense. 'Please Ṣe̩ẖ̣gè. It's me, Ǻdã. '. As it started to paw at him again, he recoiled, as if worried its affliction was contagious, and then swung the pacifier hard into its ribs.

It immediately crumpled to the ground like a ragdoll.

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When Ada came to, she was outside the building in a side alley, with a throbbing pain where she was struck, but what hurt more was the feeling of being utterly alone. Though Serge was by no means a close friend, he was a friendly face she had come to enjoy seeing each day, but even he didn't recognize her.

Home... she just needed to get home. There, she could regroup and think about what to do next. She tried to summon a taxi but was denied with the message: Unauthorised service. Please register an identity.

Her apartment was too far to walk, so the only other option was public transport. There was a train station a short distance away,

but she wasn't sure she could use it without registering a new identity. The thought of doing that was too much to bear, as it would be an admission that her life was forfeited, and she wasn't ready to give it up just for a ride home.

At the station, she tried to go unnoticed but soon learned she didn't have to try. People did not notice her; she was a ghost. She reached out to passers-by to test if she even existed anymore, and they seemed to avoid her unconsciously, like water flowing around an invisible obstacle. Some briefly looked in her direction as they stepped out of her reach, but continued on like nothing happened. She also started to notice more NoBodies. She knew they existed, but they had seemed extremely rare. Now she saw them everywhere filling people-sized spaces that crowds avoided.

She made her way to the platform and nervously stepped onto the train, half expecting it to deny her access, but to her relief, the otherwise invisible field briefly shimmered as she passed through, offering no resistance while showing a brief message that she'd used one of her quota of four free trips for the day.

She sat in a seat as far from anyone else as possible, and everyone else seemed to oblige her space. After a few stops, she alighted from the train and made the short walk home. As she neared her apartment, she felt a sense of relief. Finally home, somewhere safe. A chance to figure out what to do next. She stepped up to the door and waved her hand at the proximity sensor. Instead of the door instantly turning transparent and allowing access, she heard the visitor alert tone inside. Her heart sank when she heard footsteps inside approaching. She lived alone.

When the sound of the footsteps reached the entry, the door appeared to turn into a kind of magic mirror, reflecting only Ada in the frame. She quickly understood that she wasn't looking at her reflection, but at an imposter in her home who looked just like her, or at least her old self. She tried to stutter some words, but nothing came out.

The Ada lookalike seemed confused for a moment at seeing the strange figure of a NoBody standing outside. Then Ada saw a brief look of realization on her face. The imposter's expression and demeanour changed as her face hardened and her eyes narrowed.

'Your old life is gone,' she stated matter-of-factly. 'There's nothing you can do to get it back. Don't return, or I will call the police and have you arrested.'

The imposter pressed a button beside the door frame and the door instantly became opaque again. Ada went to smash on the door with her fists, but her new body seemed to be weakened, as though her violence and anger were restrained.

Ada felt like she could vomit, but there was nothing to retch. Once the nausea passed, rage bubbled up, but it felt subdued, as though this different body had robbed her of her full spectrum of emotion. An anguished scream only came out as a mournful sigh.

Ada went down the steps and ambled the streets, feeling like a mindless zombie. She wandered for hours and once day turned to night, the stars spun overhead, seen through the gaps of the towering buildings. Eventually, she found herself at another public transport station, as if drawn to it, like it was a ley line attracting people. Sapped of energy, she slumped against a pole and sobbed,

or at least, she felt like she did. Outwardly she was not moving at all and just looked like a doll that had been discarded on the curbside to be disposed of.

After some time, with people passing by not noticing her, with no other plan of what to do, she stepped on the next tram out of the city, deducting one more trip from the quota She watched the world stream by and rested her head on the glass of the window. The tram got less occupied the further it went out, until it reached the end of the line. The announcement declared, 'Final stop. For travellers outside city limits, please disembark and get on the inter-city line.' She stepped off the tram with a handful of lone travellers and sat on a bench waiting for the inter-city train. From here the towering city skyline had receded, giving way to the night sky, and Ada could watch the moon trace its arc.

A man at the far end of the platform was watching her, not making any effort to hide it.

Ada pretended not to notice as, to her relief, the inter-city train effortlessly glided into the station and came to a gentle stop. A handful of passengers stepped on, the entry field shimmering as they passed through. Ada tentatively approached it with an outstretched hand, only to touch a solid and unyielding barrier.

'Access denied,' chimed the voice, flashing a big red circle with a strike through it, in case the message wasn't clear enough. 'Travelling out of the metro area is not permitted for unregistered civilians. Please register your identity at the terminal on the platform.'

Ada looked around where the terminal was, but returned to the bench despondent, her mind blank, not even thinking about what her next move should be. She felt trapped in her body and the city.

The man watching her stood up, started walking in her direction, and sat down next to her at arm's length. She shifted uncomfortably at the closeness, then he turned his head to look straight at her.

'Hello, my name is Robert.'

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After they had introduced themselves and made some polite small talk, Robert asked, 'So, what brings you here?'

'What do you mean?'

'Most NoBodies stuck at the end of the line have either lost something or are looking for something… or both.' Robert tried to catch her gaze, as though making eye contact would help draw the answer out.

The first real human contact since Ada greeted Serge early that morning made Ada sob internally. Outwardly, her passive body merely stared blankly at Robert. 'My life was taken from me,' she eventually managed to say.

There was a look of understanding on Robert's face and he nodded grimly, as if this was something he was familiar with. 'I'm sorry that happened to you,' he said sincerely.

'Can I get it back?'

'Honestly, I don't know…' There was more he wanted to say, but he hesitated.

'What is it?' Ada enquired.

'Even if you could, would you want to, knowing how easily it was taken from you?'

Ada looked at him blankly, not understanding what he meant. He continued, 'The identity that you thought was yours was never yours to begin with.'

'That's bu̧l̨ş̣it! It's my life.' She meekly protested, neutered of her rage.

He shook his head sadly.'Have you heard the Latin phrase 'Temet nosce'?'

Ada shook her head.

'It means 'know yourself'.'

If Ada could have expressed herself, she would've given a bemused look.

Instead, Robert took the silence as his cue to continue.

'You're confusing who you are, with identity. You know who you are. That self-image belongs to you alone, but self-image is not what identity is in this world. Identity is something that is created by the system to act as a proxy for you within it. Everything you own, all your material possessions are assigned to your proxy because you don't exist, only your proxy does. You can't truly own anything within that system.'

Still seething about being told her life wasn't hers, Ada gave no response.

Robert continued. 'You have a choice. Tether yourself to a new identity, a new proxy, that allows you to begin another life within the system, or create your own locus of identity outside of that system, controlled by you.'

'How?' Ada asked, curious, despite herself.

'You need to Patch yourself.'

'Patch?' she asked.

He pulled out a small box from his bag and slid it open. Inside was a thin strip of something that looked like a Band-Aid. 'This Patch allows you to connect to a new network, where only you control your data and your possessions.'

He placed the box on the bench beside Ada.

'You will have many questions, most of which the answers won't make sense to you yet. If you decide to Patch yourself and find the Signal, the answers will come to you when you're ready.'

'The Signal?'

He stood up. 'You'll know it when you find it,' he said with a tone of certainty. Robert looked down at her. 'Good luck.'

He began walking off, and Ada went to call out to him, but stopped herself, looking down at the Patch in the opened box and, after a moment, picked it up. She walked over to the identity registration terminal with the Patch in her hand and pressed the 'Start' button.

'Please register your identity to proceed.'

This was crazy. She had no idea what this random stranger was talking about. She had no idea what this Patch would actually do, but she didn't want to create a new proxy either. Her finger hovered over the on-screen 'Confirm' button.

'Please register your identity to proceed,' the overly polite voice repeated.

A chance to begin fresh, a new start, she thought to herself.

'Please register your identity to proceed,' the voice echoed on the empty platform one last time, before the screen flicked to the

bright welcome page that shone on Ada's receding back. The sky was clear and the air felt pleasantly balmy on her skin, with the outline of the Patch fading on her neck.

Nice night for a walk, she thought, as she strode out of the lights and into the darkness of the early morning; the dim orange glow of sunrise bloomed on the distant horizon.

Source

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