

A Body to Die For

By Curtis Jerry Smothers



Field Journal — Transcribed from Expedition Lead M. Havelock

August 11, 2212 — *Outer Rim Survey Mission / Abandoned World Designate: Khepri-4*

Walking through the dead city, we saw no signs of war or deliberate destruction—only the slow, patient victory of entropy. Towers leaned under their own weight, facades had sloughed into the streets, and what passed for vegetation—translucent, rootless fronds—gnawed at the edges of the architecture.

The air was technically breathable, but the suspended grit from the planet’s constant equatorial storms rasped in the throat. We wore breathers anyway—not out of necessity, but because a layer of carbon-fiber glass between you and the unknown gives the illusion of safety.

The building we entered was a monument to quiet order—rows of perfectly aligned shelving, each holding stacks of silicone-like squares etched with grooves and ridges so fine they shimmered in our headlamps. Archive storage, I thought, though on a scale that dwarfed even the Mars Deep Memory Vaults.

When I lifted one from its cradle, a wall panel slid open with a dry, deliberate *snick*. Inside sat a device no larger than a breadbox, its recessed slot unmistakably shaped for the squares. Power source: an elegant micro-fusion cell coupled with a zero-point energy tap. Primitive in appearance, but—if the readings were right—functioning after at least a millennium.

I slid the square in place. The projector flared to life, painting the far wall with symbols—part Terran-Egyptian hieroglyphics, part Mayan glyph work, part something that looked like 22nd-century genome visualizations. Too convenient. Either we were looking at a universal ideographic system... or someone had designed this for minds like ours.

Anita froze first, holding a square heavier than the rest. “If I’m reading this right... this is medical.”

The projection showed one of the planet’s native bipeds—tall, willowy frame, elongated face, a curtain of filamentous hair—lying on a pallet beneath a hinged dome. Beside it stood a smaller cylinder, connected by a transparent conduit.

Inside that cylinder floated an embryo. Limbs still finned, skull barely formed. Green fluid pulsed through the conduit from the elder’s skull into the cylinder. Neural tissue—living—flowed into the developing brain.

“This isn’t treatment,” Anita whispered. “It’s... transference.”

A recorded heartbeat of silence, then I said it aloud: “Recycling the mind into the next body.”

The green fluid pulsed one last time in the recording, and the infant’s limbs twitched.

Anita tilted her head. “Now *there’s* a body to die for.”

I didn’t laugh. The archive around us suddenly felt less like a library... and more like a mausoleum.

Supplementary Entry — August 14, 2212

Piecing together other squares, the pattern emerges. The transference was their answer to mortality—not cloning, not quantum-uploaded consciousness, but a direct grafting of the elder’s neural tissue into the unborn. Memory, instinct, skill—all inherited whole.

It must have been their triumph. No child grew up ignorant. Leaders carried their wisdom into each rebirth. Artists were born already masters of their craft.

But the records darken. Generational diversity collapsed. New ideas thinned, then vanished. Storms drove them indoors; births slowed; transference increased. Eventually, the population curve flattened to nothing—not for lack of capability, but because their civilization had stopped producing *new minds*.

They lived forever... until they couldn’t live at all.

Epilogue — August 21, 2212

We've recovered one intact transference unit. The onboard AI insists it can be made compatible with baseline human neurobiology in "two hundred and thirteen days."

Command wants to bring it back to Luna for testing. Anita argues it's the key to ending all disease, all cognitive decline, all waste of human potential. She's right.

But the others see what I see in the archives. Their last century was a perfect circle—no innovation, no mutation, no change. A people who preserved themselves into extinction.

The unit sits in quarantine. No one has touched it since we powered it down.

And yet... every time I pass the containment room, I swear I can feel it *waiting*.