

# THE QUARRY

## The Man Without a Heart

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She had been looking at him all night. Quick, furtive glances from across the crowded bar before looking away again. Felix's gaze jumped from patron to patron. He watched friends and co-workers laugh and chat. He spotted couples out on a date night and families coming together for a meal. But his gaze always returned to the dark-haired woman, and each time he caught her watching him.

She was about his age, and he found her intriguing. Though he wasn't sure if that was just because of the attention she was paying him. She and five others—her friends, Felix assumed—filled a booth against the wall of the bar. Felix sat on a stool against the bar in the middle of the room, holding a drink.

It was a crowded Friday evening of city workers celebrating the end of another week. Felix sat alone, but he didn't feel it. How could he amongst so much life? Spending time around people going about their lives was a reminder he too was alive.

His gaze moved back to the woman in the booth, and sure enough she was looking back

at him. This time, however, she didn't divert her attention when Felix's eyes met hers. So intense was her stare that Felix wasn't even sure she'd realised he was looking back at her. What about him was causing her to examine him so closely? Felix shrugged to himself and raised the glass in his hand toward her in greeting. The movement snapped her out of her trance, and she turned back to her friends.

Felix returned to watching the room, drinking the water in his glass—he wasn't game enough to ever drink anything else—and picking at the salad in front of him. He turned to a movement in the corner of his eye and was surprised to see the woman walking from the booth to where he was sitting.

'Sorry for staring, but I swear I know you from somewhere,' she said, taking the empty seat next to him and leaning on the counter.

'Felix Kingston,' he introduced himself, 'the only person in the world without a heart.' The woman's expression switched from surprised recognition to elation. It wasn't the usual reaction Felix got to this statement.

'Of course!' sitting up straighter and moving a little closer. 'I've read about you. Doctor Moretti's famous patient. World's first synthetic heart.'

'It's always nice to meet a fan,' Felix said with a laugh.

'I'm Sarai. Sarai Romero. Your doctor is a big inspiration, actually. His work on synthetic body parts is ground-breaking.'

'Nice to meet you, Sarai. You've studied his work?' Felix asked.

'You could say that. The company I work at is currently developing an artificial lung, to improve the lives of people with lung diseases.'

'I can't say I've ever thought of this thing as an improvement. A regular heart doesn't need its battery charged.'

'I'd say being alive is an improvement to the alternative,' Sarai smiled at Felix. She had such an energetic smile.

'Can't argue that,' Felix conceded, smiling himself.

'Hey, can I buy you a drink?' Sarai asked.

'Oh. Thank you, uh, I don't really drink though. I avoid alcohol,' Felix said, indicating his glass of water.

‘Really? But your heart should be able to handle a bit of alcohol. Enough for a single drink at least. It is designed to react to impulses from the brain, so it will respond to any effect on heart rate or blood pressure,’ Sarai trailed off. ‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to lecture.’

‘No, it’s fine. You probably know more about this thing in my chest than I do,’ Felix said, waving her apology away.

‘Did you know it basically makes you a cyborg?’ Sarai asked. Felix paused to think, then responded with a chuckle.

‘See, you’re teaching me already.’

Sarai sat in a cafe, waiting for Felix to arrive. It was their third get together since meeting in the bar two weeks ago. It had started off with her wanting to know all he could tell her about his mechanical heart. He told her about the regular check-ups, how the silicon plate—silicon so as not to restrict his movement—covering his heart had to be removed each time.

In turn, he asked her about her own work and she expressed how eager she was to move onto her own projects. Her passion lied in augmentation. One day humanity could be using machines to enhance vision, hearing, strength, and possibly even intelligence. She wanted to be at the forefront of that movement.

Somewhere along the way Sarai had started to think of them as dates, though she wasn’t sure if Felix felt the same. He was easy to talk to, and even easier to laugh with. The last time they’d met the conversation had flowed seamlessly from her questions about his heart, to her work, then to their interests, ending in a friendly debate about chocolate of all things. There was a connection, but he’d never made any moves. Sarai found herself hoping he would, but was starting to think she might have to act first.

Sarai looked out the window, spotting Felix’s black, un-brushed hair above the heads of the pedestrians passing by. He stepped into the cafe and Sarai waved at him as he approached, taking the seat opposite her. Asking how his week had been, the conversation immediately turned to his heart as he described his most recent check-up. Some pumps were getting a bit worn, so Doctor Moretti had replaced them with new parts.

‘The ventricle pumps?’ Sarai asked for clarification. Felix nodded in confirmation, before continuing his recount.

She found herself staring at his chest, where she pictured the machine driving blood around his body. Doctor Moretti, the heart’s architect, was like a modern-day clock maker. An artisan creating a finely tuned device designed to perform with absolute precision.

‘My eyes are up here,’ Felix chuckled, waving for her attention.

‘Can I see it? Your heart?’ Sarai asked, her voice soft.

‘What? Here?’ Felix asked, surprise in his voice. Sarai looked up, remembering the cafe they were sitting in.

‘No, I suppose that wouldn’t be appropriate,’ she said, then allowed a smile to curve her lips, ‘but my apartment is nearby.’

Felix stepped into Sarai’s apartment, as she held the door open for him. A couch sat in the middle of the room with a jacket thrown over the arm. Books were haphazardly arranged on a shelf, and an open DVD case sat next to the television. There was a wooden dining table covered in mechanical components and tools. Meals seemed to be taken at the sofa, as her breakfast bowl was still sitting on the ground.

Closing the door, Sarai stepped past Felix. She cleaned up the remains of her breakfast with an apology, and explained how she often took work home. With a smile as strong as a promise she told him to get comfortable, and she’d be right back after taking care of a few things. Felix watched her walk away, vanishing into the hallway at the other end of the room. He often found it difficult to pick up on signs, but he was beginning to think there was a slight chance she was interested in more than his heart.

Felix busied himself by looking at Sarai’s collection of books. The lower shelves had thick tomes on the human body. There were also a lesser number of texts on cybernetics. Only one text crossed both topics, and it was one Felix immediately recognised. It was authored by Doctor Moretti, and contained several chapters around Felix and the machine in his chest.

Footsteps behind him alerted Felix to Sarai’s return. She crossed the room, taking a seat

on her couch and motioning for Felix to join her.

‘I could sign Doctor Moretti’s book for you. You’d be the envy of your colleagues,’ Felix joked as he took a seat beside her. Sarai shifted a little closer once he was seated.

‘Maybe not as much as you think. Most of my colleagues aren’t quite as passionate as me,’ Sarai’s eyes were focused on his while she spoke, but dropped down to his chest as she went quiet.

‘Do you want to see it now?’ Felix asked, receiving a nod from Sarai in response. He undid the buttons of his shirt, pulling it open. Felix didn’t look down. He knew what would be there: a flesh-coloured, silicon plate welded to his chest by a glue-like substance designed to hold it in place and stop skin growing over it. Instead, he watched Sarai’s reaction.

Sarai seemed like the sight of his chest had caused her to forget how to breathe. In fact, Felix thought it seemed like she wasn’t aware of anything else right now except for the machine in his chest. She reached out with a hand, stopping short of touching it. She looked up, as though suddenly remembering Felix was there.

‘May I?’ she asked, gesturing to her heart.

Felix nodded.

Sarai’s heart was thumping in her chest. She was expecting to feel the same from Felix as she rested her hand on his chest. The silicone was soft to the touch, yet so different to skin. But she felt no heartbeat.

She moved closer, leaning over him to press her head against his chest. She realised she hadn’t even stopped to see if Felix minded. He gave no protest. She listened to his heart, and knew she was listening to a sound unique to Felix.

It wasn’t a heartbeat, but it had rhythm. The sounds of pumps rising and lowering, pushing his blood around, entered her ears. There was a symphony of machine sounds as the various parts that kept his body functioning moved in unison. Felix was the future. He was beautiful.

Sarai placed her hand back against Felix’s chest, feeling the silicon plate give a little to

her touch. There was a slight vibration travelling from his chest to her hand. His heart rate seemed to be increasing.

‘You’re nervous?’ she said, half questioning, as she looked up at him.

‘Or excited,’ Felix said with a smile. He took Sarai by surprise as he lowered his head, touching their lips together and drawing her into a kiss. Her shock was brief, and as his arms wrapped around her she returned the kiss. Her hand remained on his chest as the hum of his heart sang to her a melody.

With regret, but needing to catch her breath, Sarai pulled away from Felix. His hand came up to cover her one pressed against his chest. He clasped it tightly, pressing her hand hard against his chest. His grip was almost too strong.

‘I think my heart skipped a beat,’ he said, breathing hard.

‘Tell me about it,’ Sarai laughed, giddy at the closeness they’d just shared.

‘No, I—’ Felix cut off suddenly, his grip over her hand going limp. Sarai cried out in shock, moving out of the way as Felix crumpled to the side.

‘Felix!’ she called out. Sarai wanted to grab his shoulders and shake him, as if he was only sleeping. She ignored these instincts. Instead she laid him on his back and felt for his pulse, finding nothing. Finally, she put her hand over his chest, hoping for that distinctive, mechanical beat. The machine in his chest had stopped.

Sarai stood up, scrambling to her cluttered dining table. She knew she only had a few minutes at best. Time wasn’t on her side. As she grabbed the tools scattered over the table she gave a quiet thanks to her habit of bringing work home.

Kneeling by Felix’s side she tried to lift the silicon plate from his chest, but couldn’t budge it. The adhesive holding it in place was too strong. Taking a scalpel, she cut into the silicon. Each slice left her worried she’d cause further damage, but she couldn’t let that stop her. She might already be too late.

With a final cut, she peeled the silicon off Felix’s chest. The device sat within a metal-ceramic cavity of artificial bone, joining with his ribs. Plastic tubing connected with arteries. Sarai would have been mesmerised if the situation wasn’t so dire. Even so, she couldn’t help but marvel at the engineering.

Where the ventricles would be the machine instead had complex pumps. Like a ventricle,

they were designed to pull blood from an artificial atrium, and then push the blood around the body. Sarai noticed one of them had stopped, and the other didn't seem strong enough to move the blood on its own.

Glancing back at her table, Sarai wondered if she had a pump. She saw the prototype lung she was working on. Could that work? It didn't have to be a permanent fix, enough to get the blood moving again. The lung was designed to act as a big pump.

Sarai hurried back to the table, grabbing the lung. She had to try.

Felix opened his eyes to a familiar, but unexpected ceiling. The ceiling that always greeted him after waking from check-ups on the machine in his chest. He had no memory of coming in for a check-up. It felt like his chest was still open as well. He lifted his head slightly, looking for his doctor, and an explanation.

His movement must have been noticed, as Doctor Moretti was quickly at his side. The doctor questioned how Felix was feeling, but was already checking Felix's pulse and glancing at the mechanical heart.

'What happened?' Felix managed to ask. His voice felt like it hadn't been used in days.

'Ventricle pump jammed up, stopped the blood flowing,' the doctor answered. 'The second pump should have been enough to keep you on your feet until the faulty one could be replaced, but theory doesn't always turn out in practice.'

Felix laid his head back against a pillow, taking in the doctor's words. It was his biggest fear realised, the machine stopping without warning.

'But,' Doctor Moretti continued, 'I am working on some new pumps. Should prevent this occurring again. Actually, I've got the young lady who brought you in assisting me. Her quick thinking saved your life. Jury-rigged an experimental lung-pump to your heart, just to get the blood flowing again. I'm impressed with her ingenuity.'

'Sarai saved me? Is she here?' Felix asked.

'She's just outside. Let me go get her,' the doctor said, leaving Felix's side.

The worst may have happened to Felix, but he was still here. He was still breathing and, despite his machine heart doing what he'd always feared it would, blood was still flowing through his body.

Felix heard the door to the room open, and he turned his head to the sound. Sarai stood there, framed in the doorway looking both pleased and relieved to see him. He gave her a small smile, and she hurried to his side, reaching for his hand.

Felix took Sarai's hand in his, holding the woman who had mended his heart, and he knew he was alive.