

The Zombie Manifesto

A Novel

By James Peters

The voices in my head tell me the following story is true,
and the voices never lie.

Dr. Fundament Fathom

Chief of Surgery

Dark Matter Corporation

I am an unclean beast from the forest primeval. Uniquely qualified to explain how eating a live rat requires much faster attack skills than consuming more passive types of vermin. For one thing, they squirm like the dickens, and worse yet, quite often, they bite back. Eating an already dead rat is out of the question. After all, I'm not a barbarian for goodness sake. With larger beasts, I like to start at the genitals and savage my way into their warm entrails. A rat presents a different challenge. You'd never start on that end, not with their tiny boy parts and that slithery tail. My advice, grab a rodent firmly around the chest and neck and bite down swift and hard, never allowing their sharp incisors to attach to whatever soft flesh they might chomp in return, like your lips and tongue or the soft fleshy insides of your cheeks or the uvula at the back of your throat. Be a better biter. Chomp down hard, swift and sure. Spit out the head and suck the blood and guts straight from the squirming torso. Squeeze and inhale to enjoy every gibleet before discarding the fur. The word I would use is devour. Devour the entrails. If you can find a more succulent creature, by all means, enjoy. When times are hard, eat whatever you can snatch. But for chomping on a live and writhing rodent, crunch clean and

hard at the neck severing the head in one go enjoying the fount.
It's the only way.

Cool white hands smoothed the tight black leather snugging
my naked frame even though my second skins were smooth like me.
With pleasure my hands pressed hard against my own female flesh.
Understand me.

I would never dream of imposing myself upon the attention
of the reading public were it not for the importunities
emanating from several of my closest friends. I should have
otherwise remained silent concerning the particulars of my
premature death. The passing of my erstwhile hearty companions
also created a good deal of consternation, I know, and so I've
determined to do the best I can to set people's minds at ease by
painting a happier hue over the sad and somber scenes I last
related.

From the start one fact I feel most compelled to establish
revolves around the circumstances of my own demise. A certain
number of assiduous investigators will insist to the present day
my death resulted from exposure to ultra violet rays mixed with
industrial toxins including nuclear radiation seeping from the
myriad dilapidated power plants falling into disrepair across
the wasteland. Others with equal adamancy will maintain my poor
dog's body boiled within the furnace of the dying time and

expelled its last breath resulting from extreme heat exhaustion and dehydration. What possible difference could it possibly make whether I passed on with a bang or a whimper when the one incontrovertible truth remains: I did in fact die.

The killer red sunlight grew brighter and hotter until shouts and cries arose from among the prostrate crowd lying elbow to elbow with me on the first floor of the hospice like some finny tribe stranded on a sand spit when the river runs dry causing their gills and mouths to pump in breathless agony. My mind went blank, my favorite part, and although I can't recollect it, the part I'm most thankful for, the perfectly dark oblivion. I couldn't have been happier. Nobody bothered to enquire whether or not I might actually want to be revived.

When I awoke into my new surroundings the first thing I understood was that I was naked. Cold and clammy lying on a stainless-steel operating table and only a loin cloth covering my middle zone and no covering at all over my chest fallen grotesquely flat. Every nerve ending in my body tingled with the urge to flex and stretch, yet without having to be told I kept my head still. Hands grasped my body at strategic points up and down my frame and though their faces were hidden behind surgical masks I immediately recognized them as Hater's geek scientific buddies from the Nika and Nasty fan club.

"I can't believe she keeps waking up."

"Hold still, Nika. Try to lie perfectly still and don't move."

Oh, I tried to groan, how can I lie still when life is busy purging death from my limbs? I gurgled and howled like a newborn. Then I thought the better of my exertions. Was I fighting for or against life? The poetic line recurred to me about being half in love with easeful death. Relapsing into repose I beseeched the void to obliterate my consciousness and for a second time the void obliged.

Time holds scant meaning for the patient emerging from ether. Darkness enveloped me when I next awoke but not the eternal type of sleep I longed for. Barely perceptible light from a mysterious source glinted off every metal surface and as the glow resolved my view I realized I lay not in the morgue but rather in an elaborate operating theater. The possibility I had undergone a radical double mastectomy passed through my mind. Maybe the medical establishment had allowed their students a little practice time. Bitter tears of resentment against those who presumed to hack away my extremities to preserve a life I'd already done with sprouted from the corners of my eyes. Afraid of what else I might find altered I cautiously investigated beneath the draped towel and to my astonishment took well in

hand, as though I owned it myself, Hader Glascock's prodigious male member.

Instead of bringing in the whole math club to greet my resurrection they chose three representative wise men who crept into the room and positioned themselves along one side of the operating table.

The lead boy stood the shortest of the three. His slick black hair flowed towards the front of his face before sweeping back again into a gorgeous pompadour. On the bridge of his nose leaned forward a thick pair of black plastic glasses with sharp angular edges resembling the fender clips on a late model Cadillac. With that pale cherubic face he would remain a teenager well into midlife. The second boy wore his reddish hair close cropped. At first I mistook him for a sadist until he spoke in a sweet thoughtful voice and I realized his sharp blue eyes and ginger freckles weren't entirely his fault. The third boy turned out to be the real doosey. Owl glasses, bed head oblivious to comb or brush and the tactless expressions of a home-schooled retard. During the course of our interview I gained the impression he had forced his way into the operating theater uninvited.

"How are you feeling, Nika?" Flash Cadillac inquired, avoiding eye contact by examining my other suitors instead.

"You should see the other guy," I said, and the three snickered and snorted as only nerds can do.

"You're recovering quite nicely," said Ginger Rogers, and his simple sincerity and compassion made him a welcome ambassador.

"None of these pleasantries has anything to do with the matter at hand, though, do they?"

"One never knows," I said, straining my eyeballs to take in the disagreeable third member of this welcoming committee and catching sight of that hair and those goggles and the leering jaw full of crooked teeth I decided he wasn't worth the effort and closed my eyes against that tone of voice.

"How's your head feel?" Flash asked.

Opening my eyes I realized I may have slept a little. I found his head poised directly over mine.

"I don't feel like I can move it," I said.

"No, don't try to move. Lie still as you can. Remain stationary." He straightened up and turned to his colleagues. "It does look good, though."

"It's healing quite nicely," Rogers said, and I realized they were no longer talking to me.

"Must be really frustrating not to be able to move your head."

"Be nice, Connor. You're not even supposed to be in here."

"Don't patronize me. I can be in here if I want. I helped as much as anyone."

"Don't be mean. She's waking up from major surgery."

I don't remember when exactly the world was taken over by teenagers.

"Nika, do me a favor and wiggle your fingers. Okay, good. Now wiggle your toes. Excellent. Can you open your eyes again?"

"I didn't realize they were shut."

"Keep your head still and follow my finger using only your eyes. Good. Any blurriness?"

"Yeah, everything's blurry and double."

"Pretty sure that will go away after a few days and you'll be able to focus better. Any headache or nausea?"

"Nope."

"No headache at all?"

"Nope. My brain feels cold," I said, closing my eyes again to escape the uncertain contours of the room.

"Notice she said her brain feels cold, and not head," Connor said.

Rogers sighed with strained patience.

"We had to put a copper plate in your head," Flash blurted out. "We would have preferred titanium but copper was all we could find."

"Why did you put a plate in my head? I don't remember asking you to do that, or giving permission," I protested, trying not to panic.

"We don't need permission to save a life," Conner said. "All life is sacred."

"Just tell her," Rogers whispered. "Explain what happened."

"Yes, by all means, explain what happened," I said, in part to stop them from whispering as though I wasn't lying right there and couldn't hear every word they were saying.

"Well, you died," Flash said. "In that last heat wave. In the hospice. You boiled to death, basically. Along with everybody else. At least we think you did. We're pretty sure you did. Your body was riddled with cancer. So it may have been that as well. We're not sure. Not that it matters. We'd been collecting cadavers from that particular hospice for weeks. Naturally when we saw your body and recognized it was you we

decided to do something about it. So we immediately put your body on ice and brought it back here."

"Where's here?"

"The research facility. You know, the one Glascock was living in when you came to fetch him."

"The one that moron set fire to the morning you left," Connor explained.

"I seem to remember something about that incident," I said. "We were already on our way out when we heard the commotion."

"You could call it a commotion alright," Connor snorted.

"She just did," Rogers chided.

"The fire gutted the inside of the facility that day, which in the long run wasn't all bad," Flash said.

"Yeah, it drove the priests away. A major improvement. They left the premises and the troopers left soon after," Conner added.

"Their leaving freed us up to do a lot more of our own original research. Without any more outside interference our work has progressed rapidly," Flash said.

"They lost their funding. So my Dad said he'd fund their research if I got to help."

"And you do get to help, but you're not in charge," Ginger hissed between clenched teeth.

"I know I'm not in charge. Who said anything about being in charge? I said I get to help."

"You're not helping right now."

"Nobody asked you, Rogers."

"Your father must be a real Powersby, funding medical research," I offered to intercede.

"Ya Think?"

The shock wave of his response made me grimace.

"Look what you did!" Ginger whispered fiercely.

"I'm sorry, man. I didn't mean to."

"Your voice was a tad loud just then."

"Are you feeling sensitive to noise?" Flash didn't appear to be embroiled in the bickering going on between the other two.

"No, just that particular noise then."

"I said I was sorry. What more do you want?"

"Not exactly knocking me out with your sincerity, dude." I rotated my eyeballs in Flash's direction so he would know I wasn't addressing him, and struggling to concentrate, I closed

my eyes. "So you brought me here to your reconstituted lab under new management. Care to explain to me what's the deal with my body?"

"Your old body was no good anymore. Like I said, full of cancer, so we found you a new body and performed a brain transplant."

"A brain transplant," I repeated, the way you do when you can't believe you heard someone correctly the first time. "And whose body am I in now?"

"Your old friend's: Hader Glascock."

"You took my old brain out and you transplanted it into Hader's body?"

"Yes we did. Isn't that great? After his untimely demise..." "He shot himself..." "We know, Connor..." "After that we thought, what a perfect match. His body was on ice already. Yours came in soon afterward. What a great opportunity, a ravaged body with an above average brain, and the brainless corpse belonging to our lifelong friend and mentor."

"Did it never occur to you to put my brain into the body of another woman?" I knew my annoyance was pointless but sometimes the emotions hold sway.

An embarrassed silence ensued for a few moments before Flash finally spoke up. "Actually, it did. We considered putting your brain into the body of your other friend, the lovely Nadezhda, but her system had been too poisoned by toxins. Unscheduled abortions can be ugly. Whereas Hater's body was in mint condition."

"Not counting the gaping hole in the back of his cranium, of course."

"For goodness' sake, Conner."

"What? It's true. That's where the copper plate came in handy, and I supplied the copper, by the way."

"But you didn't fashion it."

"It didn't occur to any of you bright young fellows to search for another female body? You had a whole hospice full of dead and dying people. Didn't it occur to you I might actually like being a woman?"

"But you were a lesbian before. You liked women. So now you can like women all you want."

"I enjoyed being a woman who likes other women."

"Don't listen to him, Nika," Flash interposed, "Your sexual orientation had nothing to do with our final decision. Hater's

cadaver proved optimal. We found out about his death almost right away and froze it before hardly any deterioration had taken place. A day had gone by before we managed to take custody of poor Nadezhda's body, and as far as the cadavers from the hospice go, well, there weren't any good ones to choose from. Not after the hunger and the heat got to them."

"Not like Hater's."

"No, none like his. And gee, I don't know, we did it for old time's sake, ya know? Hater would have wanted it this way."

"Hater says to tell you you're a meddling fool, Connor." I used his name though we'd never been formally introduced.

"He does?" Flash leaned in closer. "How do you know?"

"He's in here with me," I said, squeezing my eyes shut again to block out so much disagreeable input.

A technical discussion followed mostly between Ginger and Flash with Conner making the occasional unwanted interjection and I found myself unable and hence disinterested in following the arguments surrounding the possible vegetable origin of the voices in my head. From what I could gather they transplanted my brain into the bone cavern Hater's brain had recently vacated in such haste and they saw no reason to scrape clean the pumpkin's insides clear down to the skull but instead left the remaining

portions after the rest took flight to act as a kind of cushion for my own grey matter to rest on like the Queen of Reason upon her throne having no way of knowing this type of skullduggery would eventually lead to a mind meld resurrecting of Hater's consciousness as a junior partner.

Their colloquy came to an end and they turned their attentions my way once more and Conner blurted out what the other two in the kindness and decency of their bedside manner had avoided, "She could also be plain-old crazy."

The shock and consternation of the other two and Conner's subsequent banishment from the operating theater belied a sense of panic on their part greater than mere concern over the delicacy of my invalid state, as though a truth too horrible to name, a possibility too revolting to digest, had been uttered.

They harried the villain out of my room and then those two Percivals returned to my bedside and resumed their vigil. At that point the noise and confusion had about worn me down to a frazzle and I begged their leave to rest my mind for a while in private repose. To my request they immediately acquiesced. They weren't fooling anybody, though. I could tell they were themselves dreadfully anxious to know the answer to the indelicate question Honor Bright had posed. For the time being and for reasons obvious I decided not to give them satisfaction

yet concerning the subject of my sanity. Keeping mum seemed the circumspect move until I might better collect my thoughts. Hater agreed I shouldn't say anything more right away.

Left to my own vices I lay for a while doing my best to hold my head perfectly still. Considering the number of tubes plugged into my body, or my new body, Hater's old one, I didn't have a whole lot of room to maneuver. Sleep overtook me unawares and I drifted through a garden landscape where I wandered naked and unashamed sporting a strap on equipped with a unicorn horn. The flowers in the magic garden opened their petals desirous of penetration but for some reason I was loathe to accommodate them. When I awoke I experienced a sense of longing and regret, which was odd, considering it was only a dream. What was the sense in regretting the instant replay button pushed on my history? My whole life passed before my eyes and yet I wasn't terribly interested.

At some point in every convalescence the patient realizes the crisis has passed and she is going to recover. For me the moment came when I could no longer lie still. I had to get up and move around or I would indeed go insane. I was sick and tired of the feeder tubes glucose saline morphine drip stuck with needles into my arm. Hater explained how to pop the feeder tubes apart while leaving the needles imbedded. Following his

instructions I uncorked myself and raised up on my elbows. My neck strained to support the egghead weight of my reconstituted cranium. Rather than wait to gauge the full extent of my fragility I fought inertia's opposition and sat up by swinging my legs over the side of the bed and clenching my teeth against swooning. Hater chattered half a dozen admonitions along the lines of 'hold steady' and 'be careful' and the like until I lost patience and told him to keep still. He mumbled a remark I didn't catch the meaning of, although the tone told me I'd wounded his feelings. I suppose he felt unnerved being along for the voyage without having any hand in the actual navigation.

"Let me sit here a minute and get my equilibrium," I pleaded, gripping the edge of the mattress and squeezing my eyes shut while I balanced my head, carefully poised.

"You'd think they could have found a better metal than copper," Hater said.

"You weren't there to supervise them," I responded, trying to make up for any hurt I may have caused. He was my best friend after all.

"You're steady enough now. Try standing up."

Sliding toes first to the icy parquet floor I regained my claim to bipedalism.

"Baby's first steps," I said, in a lame attempt at humor to bolster my own spirits.

"Know where you're going?"

"I was thinking the bathroom might prove an ennobling goal."

"Good call. It's through the door on the left over there."

Soreness of nerve and muscle radiated from every fiber of my frame. About half way to my intended destination queasiness erupted and a bile gob flopped passed my lips producing a yellow splotch splattering on the floor.

"That was ugly," I said aloud, trying to catch my breath.

"No argument here."

The door to the latrine opened outward requiring awkward maneuvering. Without falling over I managed to enter the bathroom where I received an awful fright by catching sight of my reflection in a full length mirror. The confrontation with my own image caused a major crisis of identity. When I looked down in the general blur I saw a man's appendage hanging pendulous, stomach and chest both flat. When I blinked and looked again I saw my old self, the girls firm and perky, the round hips, the soft slight belly. No matter how much I pondered and examined my

physiology I couldn't resolve the disparity between what I saw and how I felt.

The greatest shock came from the alteration in the appearance of my physiognomy. The eyes had turned lewd green, the nose less bulbous more aquiline. Smiling revealed my teeth had turned pearl white with the tint of silver that hue implies and they appeared larger because the gum line had receded and turned black. A squirming red devil of a tongue much larger than I remembered belonging to either Hater or me flickered forth so maniacally I embarrassed myself by opening my mouth as wide as it would go and wagged her about in midair. You could cause a lot of pleasurable discomfort with a rotator as long as this wiggle worm. The front of my head bespoke Venus; the rearview summoned Mars. Those boys hadn't been joking about the copper plate. This replacement felt snug as a skullcap as though I had been the one to blow my stack. My deranged black hair grew from my head swooping up and back like a triceratops shield and then it dropped and hung loosely down my back in lengths longer than it had ever reached before. I preferred the memory image to the downward glance, though you may take me as you wish. Mighty Hermaphrodite. Hater laughed and told me I was crazy.

"Dude, we need to talk. I mean, of all things, suicide?"

"I prefer to think of it as euthanasia. Nasty was gone. You were on your way out. I didn't see the point of waiting around by myself for my own slow and painful death. I took the Roman way."

"I think euthanasia is Greek."

"Don't be smarty. You know what I mean."

"Yes. I understand. Well, here we are again, my friend."

Never in my life had I presumed to adopt the title of Proper Lady. Personally, I never thought it a label worth striving for, considering the way men wielded it with such a proprietary air. Approaching the stall the reproach or admonition 'a lady always sits down' recurred to me; although I can hardly be criticized for my curiosity now aroused at the prospect of standing up while making water.

I positioned and repositioned my feet on either side of the commode. Hands on hips awaiting impatiently one event when another stream made its debut and between these two streams of consciousness I didn't know which to believe. As though with a mind of its own the constant companion let loose a torrent cascading into the bowl churning a frothy slip of chemical bubbles. For a moment the streams' cessation made me think the shows over but like one of those Beatles' songs from days of old

fading out completely only to reprise the tune a moment later the peckerwood had an afterthought of sorts. Then and only then was the job complete. As a precaution I waited in case another encore hovered in the wings. A tight spasm gave the clearest indication the show was over. Wanting to take pride in ownership I availed myself of a few squares of course grey paper for blotting the quill. Hater's spirit, aghast I would perform an ablution so unmanly, trembled with a force shaking my frame.

"Stop doing that," I grumbled, shuffling away without flushing because I didn't trust my sense of balance well enough to bend over and depress the handle. Hater had never taken my minor moody emotional outbursts seriously before and now with my brain resting on top of what was left of his brain his genial spirit hadn't changed. Of course, when we first started hanging out he could be a real brat. Once he started on the knowledge uploads though his demeanor softened and then more often than not he would respond to one of my minor tirades by putting his arm around me, a tactile move never failing in its comforting effect. Hater said I should go lie down before I fell down and I obeyed his injunction.

Easing myself onto the bed proved as dicey as leveraging myself out of it. The fancy headrest cushioned my cranium once more and I lay very still with my eyes closed and concentrated

on breathing evenly to dispel the dizziness. A little while later a gargantuan male nurse arrived and his breezy air of affable care and concern turned to a fussy consternation when he saw how I'd disconnected myself. Immediately he went about plugging me in again. As he reached across me to work on my other arm I caught a whiff of his warm skin sliding about beneath his white smock and a curious thing happened. My stomach gurgled, and I realized I was famished. When he saw my vomit on the floor he was scandalized at the audacity of my getting out of bed without the doctor's permission. I responded by letting him know I was hungry. Care beset his frown and he carried both expressions with him as he left the room. Not long afterward he returned carrying a metal cafeteria tray with plops of food resting in each separate compartment.

"Are you a real nurse?" I asked, as he raised the bed and positioned the tray in front of me on a table he wheeled before me.

"As real as they come," he said, smiling with his lips but not his eyes.

"Real education and training? I didn't think they did that anymore." I contemplated the blobs of green and brown sequestered in the separate sections of my plate.

"Sure they do," he said, and I could tell by the way he said it he thought I was some poor white wastelander while I shoveled spoonful's of multicolored goop into my mouth. Taking me for a rube made it easier for him to forgive me. "Is everything to your liking?"

"Not especially. I can barely taste it. What is this stuff, anyway?"

"Vegetable matter, mostly."

"I need meat!" I said, but as I spoke the words turned into a dog bark, taking us both aback. After a moment of awkward silence during which my own sounds echoed in my ears and died away, I said, "Okay.. that was weird."

"That was weird," the male nurse agreed. Pause. "Do you want to see the doctor?"

"Not really," I said, shoving the tray and table away. "I used to like vegetables." The mess under my nose tasted like poverty.

"Why don't you rest and doctor will be here shortly."

Time elapsed and I'm sure I slept. Every time I awoke I felt stronger with my body and brain more congealed. The doctor did come around eventually, several doctors, actually. Surgeons, who all seemed to have had a hand in my reconstruction. In their

opinion a period of reconciliation was to be expected while my brain struggled to figure out which end was up. None were more surprised than they when I sprouted breasts and showed other signs of hermaphroditism as though the DNA programing inherent in my brain infiltrated Hater's cells and rearranged them more to her own liking. In a million years they never could have predicted the shrinking of his old appendage in the front and the sprouting of a tail at the base of my spine. As the one withdrew and the other grew a yard in length they theorized my DNA messaging had gone haywire and an archetypal genome long dormant in the brain archive had been shaken loose due to the shock of transplant surgery.

Eventually they scrounged and scavenged wasteland gear, the good stuff, real leather. At night while the rest of the research team slept I prowled the corridors or went topside to breath the night air and contemplate the stars and their twinkling lights ancient beyond cognition and the barrel fires burning in the ruined city and the campfires dotting the plain stretching towards the darkly silhouetted mountains to the east. Squatting on my hams I became aware I was under the watchful gaze of a well-meaning Flash who shadowed my every movement out of a sense of responsibility for having resurrected me to no better purposes than nostalgia and they had developed the technology and were keen to give it a whirl.

Where did that leave me? Lost and lonely creature that I was feeling myself apart from the rest of the human race, no longer a child of god but an aberration of science raised from the dead and transplanted into the body of another and each night feeling a ferocity of spirit growing inside of me where before only a longing for peace had existed.

"Do you miss her?"

Flash had stolen up behind me and presumed to intuit the content of my ruminations.

"You'll never see another creature like her," I said, not bothering to stand up or face my interlocutor. "No sweeter being on this planet ever existed."

"Would you like to see her? I can probably arrange it."

At that statement I did rise and turn around to face him.

"See her? How? What do you mean?"

"We rescued her remains from Graves Registration and brought her here. She's been kept in the deep freeze unit ever since."

"To what end?"

Flash shrugged at my question. For some reason I always expected him to push his black rimmed spectacles back on his

nose, but he never did. They always remained perfectly perched just above the bump.

"We didn't want her body incinerated, I guess. Not that body. And at first we thought we might be able to cure her sickness, after the fact. And then maybe resurrect her, too, but she was too far gone. So we froze her. So we could contemplate the problem further."

"You've been busy little boys," I said, growling slightly. They labeled my barking and howling Turret's Syndrome brought on by surgery and post-traumatic stress. I forbore telling them it felt more natural and satisfying than a syndrome. I could see the look of worry in his eyes.

"Sure, let's go see her mortal remains," I managed to articulate. "Let's have a look."

"I'll need authorization first," Flash said, "and then locate the keys to the ice room."

"Do watcha gotta do, then come find me. I'll be in my cell."

Flash didn't come round again until the following evening. He was one of the few boys who would come anywhere near me. My appearance and ambisexuality frightened away the rest. In my dementia I couldn't decide which nerd to sodomize first and that

latent impulse shinning in my eyes sent them scurrying for safety. Not Flash, though. At first I thought he might be a little pervert. But then I realized like so many other human beings he suffered from loneliness and needed somebody to comfort him. That he would seek solace from a creature like me did reveal a certain strangeness.

Flash led me down a flight of stairs into the morgue empty of personnel in the middle of the night. He flipped a row of switches and florescent bulbs blinkered on and off before humming into bright white light. Only a few cadavers lay about beneath sheets except for an exposed toe Flash discreetly covered with the flip of a hospital corner. Passing between banks of body drawers rising up the walls on either side we penetrated down another flight of stairs into the catacombs where they housed the deep freeze unit and Flash swung open a door like a mammoth bank vault to reveal Nadezhda encased in a block of ice with air pockets and white flecks suspended but her features still visible in the translucent tomb. Her eyes were closed and she was so perfectly preserved they looked like she might open them at any moment.

Intent on closer examination I stepped into the room where they maintained the temperature well below zero. Suffering an involuntary shiver I advanced hugging myself and rubbing my own arms for warmth. Not once did I remove my gaze from that pale

beauty who had brought such love and comfort into my lonely and forlorn existence and whose premature death butchered my will to live and hastened my own untimely demise from the disease I had no will to resist. Frozen in time her perfect body appeared smaller and younger than I remembered as though death had shrunk her to an atavistic state prior to when I first knew her.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Flash said and I probably would have been better off without the sympathy because the second he spoke the edifice of my resolve began to crumble and realizing how utterly and totally alone and friendless I was in the world, a creature now marked and unlovable, a wave broke over my barriers and swamped my misbegotten soul with sadness and loneliness and self-pity and a sob broke from my lips and I cried. Gripping myself tighter I closed my eyes and bowed my head and wasted face in my solitary lamentation for the loss of my daemon lover. Eventually the emotional storm retreated leaving me feeling wasted and wrecked and devastated and when I wiped my eyes and looked again with baleful glances there she stood in suspended animation and seeing her there a prisoner of the ice at least one resolve returned and that was to free her in death as I tried to in life from the chains binding her to servitude. I wanted to give her a decent burial and free her from the frozen entrapment and commit her flesh to the cleansing flames of a funeral pyre.

Turning to Flash I informed him of my intention to remove Nadezhda's corpse from that chill and barren sepulcher and with flames set her molecules free on the windswept wasteland. Harboring no valid scientific reason for continuing to preserve her in her present state he agreed to help me remove the body from storage and transport her to whatever destination I indicated

"Hater says to fetch one of the dog carts from the supply shed and use that to transport her body. He says not to thaw her out down here but keep her on ice and once we're out on the wasteland the ice will melt soon enough but for most of the journey it will help keep her fresh. He says to use the maintenance elevator to take her to the surface."

"That's for real, isn't it? I mean, you can really hear him, can't you? How could you know about the service elevator? you've never seen it."

"I can hear him, just not with my ears. He thinks, and the noise is distracting. Do you know how to do what Hater is suggesting? Can you make this whole thing happen?"

"I know what he means. I can do it."

"Do you need my help?"

"It would be easier if I did it myself. Let me do it for you."

"I want to take you at your word on that statement. I'm going to the surface and wait outside for you."

With Hater's help I navigated my way up the stairs and through the labyrinthine hallways and found the exit porthole through the iron covering.

In presuming to reanimate life and tampering with my DNA in their mix-and-match gender experiment the ubernerds provided a catalyst for a devolution already manifesting some unpredictable behaviors. In the moonlight I spotted the ears of an athletic jackrabbit and much to my credit I was upon him before he sensed he was in danger. With my clawlike fingernails I perforated his furry belly and feasted on the warm entrails inside. His squealing and squirming quickly subsided and I devoured the rest of his giblets heart liver lungs with equal relish. My captured quarry still had a certain amount of meat on him but I simply wasn't hungry anymore so in order not to be wasteful and preserve his remaining flesh for some later date I folded the rabbit carcass rather like a furry omelet and buried him in a shallow grave where only I would know to find him in the cool delved earth. Instinctively I felt that if Flash caught sight of him he would for whatever reason try to take it from me and at that point in our relationship I wasn't in the mood for sharing. To prevent his becoming jealous of my good fortune I did my best to wipe away the blood dripping from my incisors and chin and

moved away from the telltale dirt mound. Then I changed my mind and dug the creature up and shook the dirt out of its fur and slid it inside my leather vest next to my skin for safekeeping. It was selfish of me but there you have it. My yummy bunny. Not yours. Mine.

Soon enough Flash appeared around one end of the building and struggled to haul a four-wheeled cart burdened with its morbid cargo covered over with a canvass tarp. I travelled more than half the distance between us in order to meet him in advance. When I lifted the covering to inspect my precious cadaver anger flared inside me because the villainous fool had situated her face down so her beauteous backside and delicate female flesh were prominently on display. Even in death she was sexy and alluring. Hater remonstrated with me for my lascivious thoughts, arguing two wrongs never make a right. He also asserted the propriety of Nadezhda's mortal remains traveling face up. I'm sure my impure thoughts about her shapely derriere would have subsided of their own accord without any prompting from Hater. My mind strayed for a moment, nothing more. Simply contemplating the sexuality of a dead woman's naked body doesn't make you a bad person.

"Flash, we can't travel with her this way. She has to ride face up."

Abandoning the traces Flash came around to the rear of the wagon and stood next to me while he absorbed my critique of his handiwork.

"It's the best I could do. It's the only way I could load her in there. You have no idea how heavy that block of ice is, especially with her inside it."

"She can't travel facedown like that. It's obscene, and Nadezhda always wanted to be thought of as a proper lady, even though she had no idea what the words meant. So we've got to flip her over somehow so she can ride properly. Get in the wagon and go to the front end there and I'll stay at this end and we'll work together to flip this block of ice."

Flash did as he was told and after much slippery grappling with the block of ice we managed to leverage a half turn. After a second monumental gruntfest we set my beloved Angel to right and studying her perfectly preserved countenance I reflected it was a good thing we were acting decisively now to do the right thing because I was struck by the random urge to change my mind and preserve her body so that I might go on contemplating her beauty indefinitely. Perhaps intuiting my weakening resolve by some token in my expression Flash whipped the canvas tarp over the frozen corpse of my beloved thus interrupting my reverie.

Working together in the traces to drag the cart towards the dirt road leading east into the wasteland we made our way on our

unhappy mission, a pair of hapless grave-robbers intent on doing what was right for a woman widely considered to be the most gorgeous female of her generation. Like a lot of intellectuals Flash proved rather frail and weak in his body, a failure I never blamed him for considering the compensatory power of his brain. So once we arrived on the relatively flat and even road I dismissed him from his duties and shouldered the burden alone. What a ghoulish aspect I must have presented to the empty and uncaring universe as the grieving gargoyle with her wings folded and tucked away dragging the mortal remains of her dead lover headlong into the onslaught of a blistering dawn.

My original plan had been to locate an abandoned hovel as fuel for a funeral pyre. The midday heat intervened forcing us to veer off towards some old factory works as a source of shelter. An iron works, smelting runnels, capacious iron pots suspended from battleship chains, peripheral buildings warping inward, and rusting equipment sheds of corrugated tin. We found some kind of ancient furnace piled high with coal, a final project planned for and then abandoned amid the chaos of the great societal collapse.

Wheeling the cart through a factory opening two stories tall into the interior shadows shielded Nadezhda's remains from further exposure to direct sunlight. Water dripping from the sweaty ice dappled dark wet spots in the coal filthy dust. Poor

damp Flash looked wilted in the heat as though he too were melting. I peeked under the tarp and estimated the remaining ice might possibly last until sundown when action would be necessary to prevent decomposition.

To cool Flash down I snapped off a chunk of ice and handed it to him and broke one off for me too pressing it to the back of my neck and then sliding it around to cool the hot blood surging through my veins. For the sake of surviving the oppressive heat we removed the tarpaulin and crawled into the back of the cart and lay unabashed next to my girl in the cool puddles gathering on either side of the ice block and we rested as well as we could during a prolonged siesta. Midday came and went and with it peaked the heat.

As the sun sank behind the Earth's curvature the air cooled enough for us to arise and I told Flash to head back to the citadel by himself because I wanted to care for Nadezhda in private. He didn't argue. I'm sure the prospect of his air-conditioned cell must have been enticing. For some dumb reason he felt compelled to rush me and plant a kiss on my cheek. I responded with a two-hand shiver driving him back a few steps. He looked relieved I didn't bite his head off for the indiscretion. Maybe as a way of saying sorry he presented me with a gift. From beneath his cowl Flash removed a blunderbuss and handed it to me stock first.

"It's a grenade launcher," he explained as I turned the weapon over in my hands, examining it. "And it's loaded. Ever fire one? It's easy. Just point it and pull the trigger. There's no recoil at all, hardly. Here's four more mashers. To reload pluck one off the belt and slide it down into the barrel until it clicks. You may not need a self-defense weapon but you never know."

He looked on the verge of kissing me again so I spun him around and gave him a shove to send him on his way. Left alone I pondered my bleak surroundings, the iron and steel good for nothing without the water necessary for hydrating human beings. Rust I always found depressing. So much arrogance had fallen flat and abandoned. The brainless wreckage left over from Empire hath made me mad. Powersby showed me how the old rules no longer apply when you're rich. Standing amid the ruins the latent genius in their attitude struck me and while I could in no way lay claim to the prestige of the oligarchy I knew someday things were going to be different for me. Someday I would be the master in the golden tower. Someday I would benefit from the fancy tax rate.

At the thought of my own grandiose ambitions my mind reverted to my two lost friends and the unerring support and sustaining love they supplied to me on my many adventures and misadventures. Now I inhabited the body of one with a potent

fragment of his illustrious consciousness anchored under my brain and the other my lover with her voluptuous flesh surrounding the spark of her genteel wit vanquished and resting in a cold puddle.

Stripping naked I crawled onto the cart and lay down beside her whose bluish lips and marble white skin remained as lovely in death as they had been in life. As I lay my head upon her pillows and embraced her silent form another tenant from the power elite recurred to me about publicly condemning the pleasure you privately desire. Why I once heard tell of a gay man otherwise conservative in his ways who so despised his natural proclivities he attended a fancy university where he earned a Doctorate of Philosophy in Denial and later opened a school of his own to train others. So if I kissed those lips and likewise surprised myself by what Hater's anatomy proved capable of I refuse to feel guilty or ashamed although I wasn't prepared for the ensuing exhaustion and emptiness. For all my physical exertions and ministrations, I had still failed to connect with her spirit.

Actually, Hater brought to mind as a student of history only could that ancient and barbarous tribe of warriors who believed consuming the heart of their opponent would endow them its vigor and courage and what about that other equally barbarous tribe who continually fed on the body and blood of

their crucified prophet in the hope of imbibing his magical powers. If both of these instances were accepted as factual then the same would have to hold true for me when I sought to reunite my soul with the soul of my one true love. Transubstantiation was not without classical precedent.

As the weather extremes outside shifted from blazing hot to biting cold I lit the furnace coals and the glow they emitted warmed my face from without with the same fire as the dawn of a new idea radiating through my eyes from within.

I seared her flesh to a golden brown. If you've ever stripped well-cooked skin off a barbecued chicken then you know how scrumptious it is, the very best part.

I can already hear the objections raised in response to my attempt at ingesting my girlfriend's spirit in this manner. After all, my detractors will say, weren't you the same young woman who not so long ago vowed never to resort to cannibalism? First of all, I never said never, but that's not the point. Let me begin my response by clarifying how in this instance I was not driven by starvation to resort to anything. Neither selfishness nor greed, though both fine qualities, forced me into this culinary act. On the contrary, love motivated me to consume my friend, and love at its source is always an act of giving, never taking. She gave herself to me and from her generosity I grew ennobled.

Gripping one of her calves with both of my hands I feasted like a king of old ravishing a turkey drumstick. Goodness knows they fed off the peasantry back in the day much the same way the more powerful barons still do in ours. I gorged on her gorgeousness intent upon reviving her divine personality in my mind but there was too much of her to absorb in one sitting. I could have feasted for days on such a sumptuous banquet. Again it was Hater who offered a solution based on a mistake about ancient Roman culture committed by a writer whose name I forget. Although vomitoriums never existed, the Romans were hardly shy about binging and purging at their orgies. Hater assured me that for the magic to work it wasn't necessary for Nadezhda's mortal remains to pass the entire distance through my digestive tract for her soul to be absorbed into my bloodstream. Honestly, at times, I don't know what I would have done without Mr. Hater's sage advice. Sans any fanfare I staggered outside and blew chunks. Then I returned for more, a little shaky but undaunted.

Transubstantiation turned out to be a far more complicated act of hocus-pocos than I'd anticipated. I needed to adopt a different strategy if I was going to keep eating. Returning to Nadezhda I planted a buss on her cheek lest she begin to grow impatient. A moment's pondering revived the solution inculcated by the nuns during my stint at the orphanage, to wit: try at least one bite of every food item on your plate. By means of

this axiom we were encouraged as children to become 'good eaters', and I credit those otherwise vicious broads with my lifelong proclivity for vegetables as pungent as a Brussel sprout. Eat what's put before you. Clean your plate. Think of the poor starving children in the welfare red states. With small hope of slicking my plate in this instance I determined to sample a portion of each remaining part desperate for my tummy to bring Nadezhda's eternal spirit into the fold.

Her thighs were delicious. I could have made soup and sandwiches with the leftovers for a week. The petals of her tulips were a tasty treat indeed. Her toasted giblets dripped and sizzled over the open fire. Avoiding the spleen for the moment I relished her medium rare heart. Her sumptuous breasts fried down to a delicious kind of flaky flan. As any single person can attest cooking for one is never easy. Waste not, want not, I always say. Actually, I never say that. I don't know why I lied just then. As phrases go it just seemed appropriate.

I cooked the entire delicious girl and in the process created a banquet. Exasperated by the feast of plenty I rummaged through the voluminous bag and extracted every plastic food container I could lay hands on and packed each one brim full of warm cuts and cold cuts. Having eaten her heart I could definitely feel the love but her stubborn intellect remained in absentia. What to do about that pretty head of hers?

"What in the hell are you doing?"

A wasteland scavenger had snuck up on me unawares. He stood behind me, corpulent, grimy between the creases, belly fat flopping beneath a filthy tee-shirt and protruding from a tan duster covered in black smears, his broad-brim thrown to the back of his head in a posture of astonishment, greasy hair and beard, he had his own teeth but they were yellow, obviously not brushed. Out of this unwashed pile of humanity stared eyes like red hot coals presuming to judge me in the middle of my sacred ceremony.

"None of your business, potty mouth," I replied, hoisting the blunderbuss off the deck and launching a hot one right at his belly. He made the O face. His fat jelly swallowed the projectile whole. Then the grenade detonated. Human blubber splattered like a supernova in every direction. The concussion knocked me off my feet backwards and deafened me with a silent ringing growing louder and more acute. The blowback left me lying on the floor, stunned. A grenade launcher is not a weapon designed for close quarter combat. Duly noted.

Fragments of hot shrapnel pinioned pink meat chunks to every wooden surface in the joint and yet not a single one had lodged in me. My guardian angel must have been watching over me, I thought. Immediately annoyed, Hater ordered me to stop talking rot. I propped myself up on my elbows and wiped the goo off my

face. Though astonished, I didn't shake my head for the sake of clarity. No one really ever does that anyway. I was way too shell shocked for any kind of raucous head motion.

Whoever that outlander had been before precious little remained of him now. Bloody white shin bones protruded from his black marching boots, one still standing upright, the other toppled over. A whiff of cordite floated in the air.

Picking myself up I realized how evenly lard flop had slimed my leather gear. Hater suggested I quit my ritual for the night and head back to the research center, saying if I started out immediately I could walk all night and easily arrive before dawn. Ever thankful for Mr. Hater's wise council I did the best I could to swipe the goo off my leathers, which I discovered as time wore on to have supplied a salutary effect, packed my Tupperware into the volume and relinquished Nadezhda's stripped bones to the dully flaming bed of coals. Her head I'd already removed and held entirely aloof from the consuming fire. First I braided her hair into a stout topknot, then I lifted her visage up to mine and plied her gentle mouth with my tongue and sensual kisses. Not too much. Nothing inappropriate between unmarried people, in keeping with my newfound conservatism. So I had managed to internalize some of Nadezhda's values already, recognizing her propensity for propriety.

Too much work and rich food plus the unprovoked attack had been more than enough excitement for me in the space of a given day. To relieve the tension I pulled the rabbit from my vest and appropriating a long sliver of wire from a nearby trash pile I fashioned his ears into a comfy rabbit hat I perched atop my head. I also procured his tail and affixed it to my own rear end and plucked his buck teeth, sliding them over my own. Hater scolded me, stop being silly and get a move on. He wasn't angry. He was just teasing. I wished for an available mirror to reflect my sexy appearance.

With Nadezhda's braid gripped in one fist and the boom-boom cradled along my other arm I left the ad hoc crematorium behind and strode forth into the wasteland. The march back remained pleasant and cool in the middle of the night. For safety's sake I kept off the road's surface and trudged along down in the ditch. Silhouetting against the night sky invited every random crackpot and maniac to take a potshot and I was definitely back in survival mode. Before my resurrection and transformation I never used to carry weapons. The only other person I'd ever killed had threatened Nadezhda and thoroughly deserved annihilation. Otherwise I usually remained a low-key kind of character. Carrying that potato masher I wondered how I ever managed to get along without one. If anyone tried to hurt my friends or me they'd end up plenty sorry. Carrying that fire

stick made me feel bloody powerful. Made me long for an excuse to hurt somebody. Blasting that outlier only whetted my appetite. I imagined a world where everybody had the right to bear arms and stand their ground. You could instantly blow away anybody who annoyed you. How cool would that be! Let's face it: other people's reality doesn't matter in comparison to mine.

The sun rose as I approached a community of dilapidated desert hovels. In the dreary light of day I finally climbed to the road's surface and focused my gaze towards identifying the builders of the breakfast fire whose smoke curled anemically upwards from the poverty stricken settlement into the pink and purple sky.

I sensed the movement before I caught sight of the little girl wearing the remnant hand-me-down of some full grown woman's sheer silk pink nighty as though it were a dress, straight from poverty. Usually I didn't take much notice of small children. For some reason I found myself mesmerized by this slender creature so much smaller than a full sized human, so vulnerable, so delicious. I couldn't take my gaze away from her. Slinking off the high road again I crept synchronous with her little hippity-hop motions as she played hopscotch in the dust. She moved and I moved. I was close by the time she smelled me. When she got a load of me she let loose a high pierced shriek and bolted. Her churning thighs and flexing buttocks excited me. In

a flash I sprang after her and loped along gaining on that bob of blonde hair. I could not have said what I hoped to accomplish once I caught up to her. She was running. The running thrilled me. Something inside of me screamed to chase her.

We rounded a corner where I was confronted by the rest of the herd. They all shouted "Mutant!" and scattered in every direction. Their reaction startled me to a standstill. I spun around brandishing my weapon. Not seeing the beast they had screamed about I advanced in search of it as far back as the road. Those good people scared away whatever they thought they saw, evidently. Clutching the masher really put me in the mood to kill something or someone. Disappointment sank in my heart at having missed the chance to shoot something dead. I stood alert and erect but ultimately unfulfilled.

Annoyed I decided not to go back and try to help anyone because I was safe and might only get in the way or be mistaken for an evil agent. Shooting an unarmed man was easy enough. Getting caught in actual crossfire wasn't cool at all. I decided to get a move on back to the gun-free safety of the research citadel.

Hater was chattering about my obligation of doing him a favor. Based on his experience the boner slowly deflating in my pants might go away for now but would only return repeatedly until I did something about it. He spoke with resignation about

inevitability. I wanted to know whether or not I could just kill someone instead. Shaking his gory locks he replied that doing so would only increase the pressure burgeoning in our pants, not abate it. He had more bad news. In case I hadn't noticed, my biology was fluctuating. He'd already retracted his scrotum and hid their precious cargo behind my kidneys. I held the grenade launcher with one hand while I felt between my legs and sure enough I had no balls. My thing was disappearing too and the smaller it shrank the more I would be driven to carry a weapon; the smaller the gun the bigger the rifle. I told Hater I'd engage in self-abuse for his sake only if I got to kill someone first. Hater called me a natural born gun owner. He always knew just what to say to make me feel special.

If I'm going to be honest in this narrative and hold nothing back then I must admit Hater came up with the brilliant idea of taking Nadezhda's head to the witch lady and asking her for help in the process involving the transmigration of souls. For as much as I felt Nadezhda's heart and soul stirring mutely within me her words, her thoughts and ideas, remained trapped inside her brain wrapped inside her skull and so rather than doing irreparable violence to that precious organ Hater suggested I seek the expertise and guidance of a trained professional.

We directed our footsteps to a quarter of the ruined city by threading our way between the dilapidated hovels along the path to the witches' lair. In a post-apocalyptic setting you'd imagine the denizens would have borne witness to appearances far stranger than mine. Their gawking and absurd expressions of fright belied my expectation of urban sophistication. Only the witch raised herself above the plebian by divining my approach and stationing herself at the front door of her single-story domicile to await my arrival.

"My dear, just look at you. What manner of creature are you meant to be?" Her eyes sparkled with warmth and wonderment.

"I'm a bunny rabbit," I said. "See my ears? And look: I have a tail."

The black magic woman held out her arms thrusting her pale palms toward me as though to absorb the energy vibrations emanating from my aura. Hater couldn't stand that kind of talk. He called the terminology piffle. But it accurately described what she was doing.

"Come inside, child, and bring your friends. Leave that fire stick outside, though. You won't be needing that for any reason. Lay it on the bench there, on the seat."

"Somebody might steal it," I protested.

"Not off Mother Supernal's front porch, sweet thing. They wouldn't nobody dream of it. There you go. That's a good girl."

Lay your burden down and it'll be waiting for you on your way out. You won't be needing it. No one here seeks to do you harm. Now come inside and let's have a look at you."

Stepping across the threshold I entered a world unlike any I had ever known. Judging the place solely by the state of its dilapidated exterior I never could have predicted such an enormous and luxurious interior lay hidden behind so modest a façade. What I found beneath my feet resembled glass in its sheen but felt entirely solid like polished marble. A narrow foyer with slick black walls led to a set of stairs about a dozen steps tall, depending on how you counted them. As I climbed toward the top the witch put a friendly arm around my waist allowing her hand to glide over my curves as my hips swiveled step after step. I didn't mind. In fact, I rather enjoyed her touch.

The sumptuous décor shimmered in comparison to my scabrous accoutrement. Hater wasn't sure what to make of our surroundings. Neither was I. Without any windows the only source of light sparkled from a diamond chandelier hanging over the center of the rectangular room plunging both ends into shadows and darkness. In the murky depths at the far end an enormous burgundy pinwheel couch supported a tangle of strangers squirming naked in a pile around the velvet rotunda. A double take later the vision had vanished leaving me to wonder what

sort of snake pit we had wandered into presided over by this witch with her lascivious forked-red tongue.

Beneath the lighting four overstuffed black leather chairs faced each other like representatives from the four corners of the Earth, the four winds, the four conundrums. For your viewing pleasure a bumper large enough for a human being on display was arranged in the middle and out of old habit I luxuriated there where the witch could get a good look at me and size me up according to her own best lights. Poor Nadezhda. She appeared genuinely perplexed. To a certain extent her confusion may have been my fault. Holding her by the braid kept her head barely aloft. I never let her scrape against the floor. She just couldn't see anything from that low point of view. I held her up at eye level and searched for a response. Bless her soul. She gazed right back in that trusting, expectant way of hers, as though waiting for me to explain what was going to happen next. Willing to support me no matter which path I chose. It was for her sake I'd penetrated the witch's dark kingdom.

The witch herself shifted shapes with such ease and regularity I forced myself to think of her as a woman in youthful vigor, pale alabaster skin crowned by a blood maroon widow's peak though no man would ever come close enough to fulfill that unhappy appellation. She settled into a seat. Her

knees touched and parted. At times her saucy green eyes were surprisingly bashful.

Shall I name her parts? Who is likely to blame me or take offense? Glacial white teeth, smooth and clean. Passive and soft. Hard and toned. No fat. All lean. Sinews and vitality. A female body full of health and strength enough to unnerve the cruelest Puritan. I felt like a virgin whose bright red blood must slake the thirst of an angry god. In this garden of Earthly delights whatever expedient the witch might inflict I would never flinch but bear up under the lash and weep tears of pleasure and shame, nerves wracked and trembling, my toxic heart chastened once the pathway cleared for my lover to return.

Among the ferns and hanging vines, lilies and asphodels, flitting for cover behind the classical columns white as bone, those winged cherubim and seraphim in hiding peaked forth in wonder and delight, the terrible tension mounting inside my mind melted and resolved into a tender affection. They feared me less. I loved them more, and over this hypnotic scene the witch presided as though the whole performance was preordained.

"I want to eat my friend's brain," I said.

Those naughty nymphs spying from the foliage giggled and tittered as their delicately pointed tongues whispered childish secrets into each other's shell-like ears.

"You're lonely, aren't you, Mon Cher. You miss your daemon lover and you wish to be reunited with her soul."

"What must I do?" I implored, so immediate and implicit was my trust in this personage with the power to intuit my deepest desires. I had come as a catalyst for change and been transformed in a flash to an inert agent.

"Let's begin slowly. Here in this great hall time is not of the essence. The quality of your soul radiates in ways impossible to ignore. I understand you came here in search of help and in due moment your needs will be addressed. But first we'll need to strengthen your resolve."

"My resolve for what?"

"Obedience."

Now I was no little kid anymore and certainly no stranger to the dictatorial whims of powerful plutocrats and so when the witch dropped the O-word I flinched as though the rod had already struck my fulsome derriere or Hater's bony backside or whatever transitional equipage I was carrying around back there. Don't get me wrong. I enjoy a good spanking as much as the next person, and I'm a natural born bottom, if you know what I mean. I'm the first to admit it. But when you start talking obedience you've got to make sure that the dominatrix with the whip in her hand understands the rules and knows what she's doing. Sadomasochism is so personal. If you're not into it then you

have no idea about the complicated ground rules and other prohibitions.

"No need to worry my dear. No permanent damage is the hard fast rule."

"The magic words," I said, with the low-key phony bravado of the resigned suppliant.

"Hardly magical at all," she rejoined, and I realized I'd played too fast and loose with what for her must have been industry terms.

"I misspoke," I hastened to offer, "I should have said near and dear to my heart."

A wrinkle of displeasure pinching her lips was replaced a moment later by a smile assuring me with the rapidity of our rapprochement I would quickly forge the bonds of sisterhood with this woman even though now technically I resided in a man's body albeit regenerating itself into a more feminine form at the behest of haywire DNA signals sent by the usurper of the manor, my own transplanted brain. To an unsympathetic eye my radical and unusual dilemma must have presented a grotesque spectacle.

How nice then, and what a relief, to feel the enlightened compassion of this strange and wondrous creature as she joined me on the bumper and caressed my arm before relieving my grip on Nadezhda's top knot, placing her beautiful head with obvious gentleness and respect upon a nearby marble pedestal. If only

her round shoulders and oblong bosoms tapering to perfect points could have remained intact her likeness thus mounted would have rivaled the finest sculpture surviving from the ancient world. As it was her slender neck did a marvelous job supporting that visage unrivalled in loveliness when she lived and now drew coos of admiration from the covey of naked little angels who quit their hiding places and scampered forth to gather in awe and wonder before the totem of perfection all the while casting glances of silent importunities towards their mistress as though in need of reassuring celestial consent that the worldly existence of such beauty could indeed be true there in the Hall of Earthly Pleasure where dreams were allowed to take flight. What mystified me turned on the question of who needed whom the most in this landscape. The witch possessed the magic, including the gift of prescience, or at least she created the impression she knew towards what inscrutable goal we were floating. I mused whether the sacrificial beast can lay any claim whatsoever over the knife wielding priest or whether the poor sod only constituted so much flesh for the carving. Hater chided me for selling myself short but when she offered me a cool bath my desire to join with Nadezhda fresh and clean superseded the instinct for survival prompting me to climb out of my clothes. Hater warned me to stay on my guard as I stood their naked and

he called me a water whore in the hopes of snapping me back to reality.

"You say 'water whore' like it's a bad thing," I teased.

"For goodness sake," Hater said, as the blessed little angels took away my clothes and clustered round my grimy and uncertain body guiding me towards a shimmering aquifer of delight.

"What quality do you suppose the water is?"

I was asking Hater. He and the witch both jarred me by answering with the exact same words at the exact same time.

"Liquid Pure."

The juxtaposition of voices echoing in my head caused a dissonance disorienting me till I almost swooned. As though reading my anxious thoughts the covey of angels surrounded me and laying their soft hands upon my flesh led me to the bath and eased my world-weary frame into those deliciously cool and restorative waters.

Hater admonished me to mind my clothes. He was always so paranoid about ending up stripped and trapped in a dungeon somewhere. To a certain extent he was correct, though. Sometimes my outfit was the only thing differentiating me from a slave. I'd been one often enough to know running around naked rendered you susceptible every time.

The slave drivers had imprinted their bar codes on my previous hide back at the Club Abattoir so if a patron wanted to own my body for an hour Diamondback only had to wave the wand over my rump or my upper arm and the transaction entered the database. For a time I deluded myself into believing a body switch executed the perfect getaway from those old ID numbers until I remembered Hater had been tagged as well when he worked for Powersby, although his barcode was more like a badge of honor than a mark of shame. Troopers now would be shocked to scan a shepherd and discover a maiden hiding underneath.

My filth covered body and hair matted with gore polluted the sparkling waters moving the tiny angels to drain the tub and fill it again by opening the gargoyle spigots gushing more aqua vita from their hideous mouths and as the bath refilled they spread fragrant cleansing oils rich in emollients over my naked flesh until I groaned and sparkled. More hands than I could count massaged my shoulders arms breasts belly thighs calves feet and other assortments. Some looked with puzzled wonderment to their mistress who encouraged their ministrations by smiling and nodding her gentle approval.

Without hesitation they trusted her judgement and returned with renewed energy to the business at hand. I feared lest they find their task repulsive but their spry and lively fingers left no tender crevice unscoured, their intent energy and enthusiasm

left no room for doubt about the pride and joy they felt when performing their allotted duties. Buoyancy lifted my beleaguered soul. The pleasure put me in mind of the old adage: a well-trained slave is worth her weight in gold. Considering their diminutive stature these slender cherubs must have amounted to a motherlode piled in a collective heap on the massive iron slave scales.

With the drain left open and the spigots running fresh water perpetually replenishing the supply I marveled at the aquatic largesse bordering on profligacy. One of those urchins holding her breath swam for the bottom carrying an oversized cork in both hands and her pure white feathers streaming. Where I lay in the shallow end they covered me in an oily squirmy embrace full of the most tender affection. As though sensing the melancholy in my soul they sought to assuage the burdensome memories of my travails. Never have I been draped with a kinder gentler blanket than the one woven with their naked bodies, the threads of innocent loving kindness. In this manner we fell into a trance and were not disturbed until my fingertips wrinkled and puckered from the prolonged submersion. My little friends, bless their hearts, were loath to release their embraces so fervently beat the sympathy of their hearts. Forming a phalanx around me they guided my steps to an enormous cushion whose impervious

surface repelled both water and oil and reposing in this new location they again treated me to massage.

By this time other servants had appeared, some bearing silver trays piled high with colorful and exotic fruits and other rare delicacies. The female slaves each represented a different type of beauty obviously selected with creating a variety of hues in mind. Blue eyes and blonde hair, green eyes and red hair, brown eyes and fair hair, opal eyes and black hair, and so on. The budding opulence of their maturing bodies was barely hidden by their peekaboo virgin white tunics.

Nearby muscled eunuchs stood guard in their golden sandals and red silk pajamas, bare chested and armed with scimitars, their turbaned heads held stiff and aloof from the spectacle I offered. The same could not be said of the blackamoors swaddled in white cloth. They conferred among themselves as did the pert young girls examining my anatomy and comparing notes with what might best be described as a professional interest in a particularly challenging case. Scattered about the great hall these groups of onlookers puzzled over the issue of when the time came and they were called upon to pleasure me how best to match themselves to my variegated needs. Even with their lifelong training and experience they had never encountered a likes like mine.

Through a defect of character I was never able to relax and enjoy the luxuries of the harem without thinking about those less fortunate denizens left stranded outside in the heat and cold. I know I should have embraced my privileged position and not cared a fig leaf about the rest of sweltering humanity who had made a poor choice when they decided to be born poor. After all, they weren't me, so why should I care? I understood the essential fairness of millions of people having nothing so a select few could have everything. Still, as a dominatrix wielding a switch chased off the host of little witches who were replaced by a bevy of older girls and the proverbial bunch of grapes dandled above my mouth I marveled at how the accident of our birth entitled the prince and princess to a life of luxury and the peasants to a life of unrewarded drudgery, or in my experience sexual servitude. Because despite the pleasure and luxury I never for a moment forgot they represented the table scraps of an unseen Powersby. My pleasure was not my own but a privilege belonging to him.

However much I tried to exert my freedom as a citizen invariably I slipped back into abject slavery. No one could have been more surprised than I to discover how in my radically transformed state I found myself yet again the object of desire, queen of the harem, princess of the shifting sands.

The dip of a dainty shoulder later those sheer tunics slipped to the floor as their owners stepped shyly free of them. No one asked me my permission. They had their goal and I was it. Among the audience none appeared as the Master. The seneschal, the guards, twenty or so slaves, not counting the several ministering to me. I left off trying to figure everything out and contemplated the ceiling decorated with golden roses a foot deep and a yard across. First I worried about respect and the people watching and what they might say afterward. Then thought and reflection were squeezed out by the mounting pleasure. My moistened eyes squeezed tears of joy.

When the gang finished having their way with me I lay on my side for a while catching my breath and generally feeling sorry for myself. Not that I was totally averse to the pursuit of pleasure for pleasure's sake. At any time I might have said no. Theoretically at least I could have made a fuss and backed out of the situation but where on Earth would doing so have landed me? Hater's original suggestion about seeking aid from the priestess or witch or whatever local nomenclature you wish to apply remained in my mind an essentially valid avenue for investigation. The bath had been glorious, the food replenishing, and before you knew it there I was squirming for air at the bottom of the pile. Each experience represented a

luxurious hospitality, either that or a cleansing process. I wasn't sure I cared which.

Without hindrance I disentangled myself and arose from the pod and sauntered over to a row of golden nozzles protruding from the marble wall and grasping a golden ring pulled and quickly discovered the shower water spritzing from the head tasted equally delicious compared to the bath. A postern filled to brimming with a lard-like perfumed soap stood but a few feet away and I availed myself of several dollops spreading the spermy oil over every inch of my body until I glistened and shone like a picture illuminating the parable of the virgin and the mule. Except I didn't have a mule, and she was never naked. Without asking for anyone's opinion or permission I returned to the bath and submerged myself once more, amazed how long my hair had grown reaching halfway down my back. In life Hater's hair had always grown light and straight. According to the dictates of my transplanted brain it now grew auburn and robust.

Emerging from the bath I stood in the marble hall while a profusion of water dripped from my wild tresses. The copper plate in my head remained water tight, so that was good. Pinching the moisture from my nose I stood my ground and waited, Medusa on the half shell, come what may.

Angels depending on guywires suspended from the ceiling descended with veils of gossamer they draped around my naked

frame and the water and oil slickening my skin dampened the fine cloth clinging to my body accentuating the curves and oddities. My breasts were growing back larger than before attributable to the consumption of Nadezhda's flesh no doubt, her body now a part of my body and Hater a party, too.

The seneschal looked approvingly upon my translucent apparel. Tall and thin, though well formed, muscular, a man who practiced restraint in diet because moderation had shaped his senses amenable to a modicum of pleasure without creating suppressed or ungovernable desires and lusts. One found such efficient, contented managers running every great household. His fine brown hair parted in the middle growing that much longer than you might expect on a manly face revealing a hint of narcissism, a self-awareness of his own natural beauty, the high cheekbones, the square chin he chose to accentuate rather than downplay as though challenging you to deny those handsome and intelligent brown eyes. Layered pullovers clung to an athletic torso. Trousers of thick durable cloth hung loosely over powerful thighs and tapered to black martial arts slippers no doubt capable of high kicking an apple loose from a branch. Overall there was something organic about him.

"We're honored to have you as our guest," he intoned, revealing his supreme self-confidence empowering him to mitigate his servility with extreme condescension. His lips curled upward

in a smile but his eyes sparkled with derision and disapproval as he appraised the incongruity of my body, breasts and cock. What he failed to appreciate about my teeth amounted to their razor-sharp ability to encompass his own genitals and snap them off not only as a delicious morsel in themselves but also unplugging the pathway to his yummy entrails.

Only dimly intuiting the true nature of my peckish musings he dutifully inquired about the pangs of appetite indicated by my over productive salivary glands. With his giblets in mind I replied by employing the word ravenous. I cocked my body locked and loaded and the smile on his face faltered and the smarty sparkle diminished. He wasn't shaken, but he felt me. With a bow of his head and a polite hand gesture towards our mutual goal he bid me follow him down a marble hallway replete with oversized mirrors and hung with life sized family portraits and fine tapestries whose woven images depicted among other scenes a warrior brandishing a decapitated head bearing a horrid visage and what can only be described as very bad hair.

Shortly thereafter we arrived at a dining hall dominated by an elaborately carved table long and wide enough to accommodate dozens for a mead hall feast yet set with silverware for only one at the far end opposite the host's stiff backed and regal chair. Again I felt guilty about benefitting from such a selfish surplus. The Seneschal gripped the highly ornate chair and

seated me in a manner most gallant. He then exited the room through a different door than the one we entered by undoubtedly leading to the scullery because he reappeared a few moments later followed by the Chef de Cuisine along with the Rotisseur and a Saucier.

The room featured an abnormally high frosted ceiling and additional larger than life portraits of monarchs ancient and modern accompanied sometimes by their equestrian pals obscuring vast portions of the four walls creating an oppressive atmosphere lightened in the instant the kitchen battalion placed before me three covered silver trays and whipped away their domes to reveal a sumptuous repast.

Obviously cognizant of the important role presentation plays in accentuating any fine meal the Executive Chef proudly pronounced, "If it please, Madame," for I was seated and he could only see my upper half, "we begin this evening with an aperitif of Hirnsuppe made with the finest cream and egg yolk followed by piquant Bheja Fry balanced by a dish of Sautéed Cerveaux and may I recommend Madame this bottle of unpretentious cabernet as the perfect accompaniment."

In deference to the Chef's exquisite taste I signified for him to pour by inclining my head ever so slightly toward the long-stemmed glass. The blood red liquid slid across my pallet

and left behind a pleasant sensation of full bodied origin with a beautiful finish.

"That will do nicely," I said, as politely as possible, considering he was only one slave serving another. My approval pleased the Chef and his minions and they departed with an air of triumph animating their victory march back to the kitchen and the Seneschal escorted them out of the room leaving me to enjoy my sacred meal in peace. As I ate surrounded by aristocratic portraits I reflected on how many of them must have dined at a similar expense to their own countrymen. Yet who among us would decline a slice of delicious baked bread ground from the bones of an Englishman if the opportunity presented itself. I was put in mind of my lost love Nadezhda and as I finished the meal slicking my plate down to the last morsel she spoke to me and true to form she began with a scolding.

"Why you wake me from peace of dreams? I perfect and fine in nowhere place, tinkering no more things. Now I back here in mean old no good world. I no belong here. I pay my price. I done."

"I'm sorry, Sweetmeat, but I loved you so much, and I missed you so dearly, I just had to hear your voice again and feel your embrace."

"How you think you touch and feel me now you eat my whole body and brains?"

"Don't feel bad, Nadezhda," Hater said, "she did the same thing to me."

"I tink sometime a very selfish girl is."

"I agree."

"Listen you two: you both know how much I hate it when you gang up on me like this. You both better tell me you're happy to see me or you can both go to Hades." Only I didn't really use the classical euphemism and the voices in my head subsided into ominous silence. Nadezhda recovered her shocked sensibilities first.

"You wake me from deep sleep and fist ting you potty mouth in front of me when you know I no like dis trash talk."

"It doesn't reflect well on you at all," Hater chimed in. "You'll never reach your full potential as a human being resorting to obscenities."

Full of shame and contrition I stood up from the table and threw my napkin on the seat and cast my gaze around the room in search of a suitable instrument for my own chastisement. Over in the corner a suit of armor held a spiky ball on the end of a chain connected to a handle but I appealed to the longstanding rule honored in all the finest domiciles precluding any permanent damage. The spanking of a bare bottom should always be carried out calmly and coolly. Beating the flesh to cure the soul is a time-honored expedient borne out by the axiom, "Spare

the rod, spoil the child." Growing up my bare bottom was exposed and spanked to a rare red hue on a regular basis and look how well I turned out. Amid the equestrian portraits I found one with an actual riding crop mounted along its base. Thus we find legitimacy in the sanguine efficacy of corporal punishment even in the animal kingdom.

Rod in hand I climbed onto the banquet table on all fours and lost no time in tearing away the mesh covering and exposing my tender nether flesh to the fresh air and draughty breezes. Already my soul felt lighter. To relieve the anguish and pain aspect I ripped the front parts as well and knowing the fluid variety I could conjure from my new body I scooted over the empty finger bowl to collect the happy proceeds for later. The first self-inflicted blows landed imperfectly and hurt but not in a good way. I took a different grip on the leather crop and stabilized myself in a tripod stance and inflicted several smart slaps on my impudent backside, first the hot licks of the leather tongue then the hard rod and snapping tongue both, the pain summoning the pleasure of redemption and renewed purity pleasing to both my friends whose love and approval I so desperately desired. While thus flogging myself the witch unexpectedly entered the room. Sent to check on my progress with the meal the shock if what she found set her back on her heels.

"I have a problem," I confessed meekly, not much above a whisper.

"I would say you do," she replied, clutching her beads and barely able to contain her disapproval. She moved to the table and deftly cleared two chairs away and flipping out her palm demanded I hand over the antique leather. Trying the wind resistance a few times she commanded me onto my four bones and administered a whipping causing all three of us to cry out with delight. In no time the fingerbowl was filled and I lay on my side panting inert thankful in my good fortune to be inspired by those who loved me enough to beat me senseless when clearly it was for my own good.

The witch helped me climb down off the table and since the flogging ruined my gossamer covering she had to figure out something else for me to wear before introducing me to the Master. Putting aside pretense she clapped a clown red ball gag into my mouth and tightened the leather strap until snug. She then wrapped a studded dog collar around my neck and clipped on a leather leader several yards long. Drawing my wrists behind my back she fastened and restrained them in the loops of a leather thong. Not until she had me tightly bound did she strip away the lacerated gossamer. Nobody was resisting arrest. Come what may. I was a creature robbed of her will. I didn't care. Nadezhda's voice was coming through loud and clear. Her return caused a

rush of exhilaration to course through my blood. I could go anywhere. Do anything. Any sacrifice I might incur would be totally worth the price.

The Witch restored the leather riding crop onto the display case mount where I'd found it and drew from a hidden compartment in her long leather coat her own cudgel. She called the marks a Veil of Tears, Stripes for short, and during my sojourn in The Castle of Pain I learned respect for her and her handy minions plying my flesh. The first time she touched me with it she tapped at Hater's appendage and said, "We really are going to have to do something about that."

Had I been born with one and carried it about with me everywhere I went in life I suppose I would have developed some sort of sentimental attachment to such a loyal companion. Hail fellow well met. In my case I inherited the prize from the previous occupant and quite frankly other than allowing for standing urination I couldn't say it represented a big improvement over the previous administration. If the witch had it in mind to affect a clean break and throw the bum out then hope and change might be just the strategy. As you might imagine Hater voiced strenuous objections in the most ardent terms but sometimes in life you have to compromise. As the witch swatted my poor beleaguered bottom and drove me through the corridors of power I did my best to assuage poor Hater's anguish and calm his

fears. Alas the villain turned inconsolable emitting a low and guttural lamentation. Nadezhda finally told him to stop making that stupid noise because he was really pushing her cookies. I must say the abruptness in her tone struck me as fairly uncharacteristic of her. Usually she sympathized and empathized with Hater and his travails. For the first time in my memory she told him to knock it off in no uncertain terms. I was kind of glad she snapped at him. Moaning in that absurd fashion wasn't going to help matters any and it certainly wasn't going to deter the Witch from performing a castration.

The future caused a different amount of unease to build up in my breast and then my breathing fell shallow. This attack of nerves surprised me because I thought I'd lost the will to live. Funny what an ingrained habit staying alive becomes when everyday life turns into a fight for survival. People who've never felt deep sadness wonder why the suicide, having missed the mark, doesn't try again at her earliest convenience. They lack empathy and therefore fail to appreciate the nature of crisis, the way depression builds inside of your head squeezing your mind and blotting out thoughts of viable alternatives to plunging the tip of a cold metal barrel into your mouth and pulling the trigger. Suicide seemed like a bad joke in the case of a life valued as cheaply as mine. I preferred the term euthanasia.

I wondered why a boy as brilliant as Hater would snap the hammer on his own life. He told me the inconsequence of his existence overwhelmed him. A glimpse of his future convinced him nothing he intended to do would ever make a bit of difference to anyone. Ultimately not the cruelty of other people but the abject indifference of the universe and an existence in his case as a failed experiment lead him to take his own life. I told him he was ill equipped for gazing through a telescope and if I'd known what he'd been up to I would have come and put a stop to it. He said you couldn't blame a person for doing what he'd done. You'd be gasping for air someday yourself and the eternal blank would make everything equal. Today or tomorrow ceased to matter, ceased to matter in comparison to eons. You can't blame a person for the choice he'd made. You can't save someone from himself.

I understood what he was on about. Under certain circumstances killing yourself becomes a viable option. I found the idea of a good death more appealing than a bad one. I'd tried suicide a time or two myself so I felt qualified to comment.

Bound and gagged I was driven to the medical ward. To the rich man nothing is denied and I was not surprised he would number among his servants a medical staff. My appearance on the scene blossomed rose colored blushes in the cheeks of a pretty

young candy striper who fled through double doors and reappeared a few minutes later ducking behind the Chief Nurse who ignored the witch out of professional disapproval and guided me through the admittance doors to an examination room before removing the saliva soaked ball gag from my mouth and freeing my wrists from their leather fetters.

They wrapped me in a paper gown and laid me out on a gurney and shot into my veins a solution smoothing down every nerve in my system and for a lotus like moment I wondered whether it were possible to be a patient in a hospital and receive injections as glorious as this one as a full time paid position. One hit a day of quality juice like this junk and the world would hear no more complaints from a likes like mine. Even in my euphoria I knew perpetuating such bliss would be impossible, and then added the thought, how too bad. What a shame. A profound slumber obliterated remorse.

For the space of a brief eyelid flutter I awoke surrounded by the surgical unit. Each member of the team took turns teasing me in a friendly manner and in my drugged state I managed to exchange light banter with them except for one girl who appeared visibly crestfallen I couldn't supply a bon mot for her like I had the rest. I had run out of steam. In my muddled state I felt sorry for letting her down and making her feel left out but then I became vexed at the responsibility forced onto me for catering

to her petty emotional needs while I was the semi-conscious one in route to the operating theater.

I awoke once more and recognized Flash by his haircut and dark rimmed glasses.

"The operation was a success," he said, speaking through his surgical mask. "We're finishing up now. Everything is fine. It went very well. Very accurate."

"You're nothing more than a teenager," I slurred. "The world is full of teenagers. They're running everything now. When did this happen?"

My remarks seemed to perturb the surgeon still working on closing my sutures. He said something to Flash I didn't hear.

"No, she's fine. It's the anesthesia talking."

I felt grateful somebody in the operating theater understood me and I was also glad the young people were getting along so well.

It's curious how when you wake up from surgery you have no urge to yawn and stretch even though you've been asleep for a very long time. I did have a hankering for a hot cup of coffee and a pretty, young nurse with a nice round bottom was kind enough to fetch one for me. As she raised the bed so I could sip my delicious beverage the catheter tugged and dragged some though not in a painful way. Oh my goodness that java was deep. My fat-bottomed angel appeared pleased at my obvious pleasure.

"You're going to enjoy life as a woman," she said, without any prompting or encouragement.

"You don't say."

"They've made you so beautiful, you know, down there, like the old statues. You're so pretty anyway. Those green eyes. That auburn hair."

"What about my mouth? What do you think of my teeth?"

"I think they're kind of scary."

"Do you think I'm scary?"

"Oh no. Maybe. A little."

"The better to eat you with, my dear."

"Oh don't even joke like that," she tittered. "Not with another zombie plague going crazy outside."

I must admit feeling my appetite for female flesh return bolstered my spirits.

The polyester pants the nurse wore fit snugly and segued into flairs fitting over her nurse's white clogs. More hips than breasts, her black hair fit helmet close around her face and blue eyes shone untroubled by deep thought. Her job required a lot of hands on application and I admired that tremendously because it was so practical and I could never stay focused enough to stick someone with a needle to draw blood.

"I'll let the doctor and the surgeon know you're awake. They'll be in to talk to you and answer any questions you might have."

"How old a boy would you say Flash in the Pan is?"

"I'm sure I don't know who you mean."

"The one with the thick black rimmed glasses."

The nurse blushed and her hands needlessly smoothed her smock over her sexy hips one baby bloat would warp out of shape forever. A born breeder if ever I saw one. It was just a matter of time.

"He's not a doctor. He's the political officer. He's in charge of medical ethics. Making sure we all adhere to proper conservative values."

"Turning me into a woman adheres to conservative values?"

"They prefer you be one or the other. But you can't be both at the same time," Flash clarified, who must have been standing in the doorway and listening to our conversation the whole time to have answered so adroitly. "Your mind and body equilibrium had already effected most the gender transformation for us. We merely brought about a few finishing touches. So how do you feel?"

"Like death warmed over." The tired old cliché suddenly had new relevance.

"You have definitely cheated death."

"I was ready to cut a deal."

"Fate has other things in store for you."

"Are you his emissary?"

"I work for the Dark Matter Corporation. I'm here representing the CEO, Mr. Skip Honesty. His personal liaison."

"I'd never thought of Dark Matter as having a single leader."

"It does, and Skip is the man. Would you like to meet him? Thank him for the gender reassignment?"

"I'd do anything to get out of this bed and get this show on the road."

I could see his attitude hardening behind his eyes because I hadn't responded with the proper amount of enthusiasm to his offer of meeting the Grand Poohbah. Whatever scheme of theirs they wanted me for I didn't feel like pretending they were doing me any favors.

When the bandages came off, before I could meet the head honcho, they needed me for a demonstration in the lecture hall of their medical training center, the kind of room with a compact stage area surrounded on one side by a row of benches rising in terraces. There wasn't a bad seat in the house. The lecture began with the chief surgeon stepping forward to trumpet the success of my brain implant, the physiological response of my body, my personality and moral sensibility both transferred

intact. Usually I try not to take flattery seriously since the ancients so often warn against it lest it turn your head and blind you to an unscrupulous person looking to manipulate you against your own best interest, although I must admit hearing their encomiums provided a nice pick me up after my recent travails. I had to wonder if the left middle finger up to the knuckle knew where the right middle finger up to the knuckle was inserted at times.

During the dissertation on my brain the medical students remained alert and focused and took copious notes either on their electronic devices or the old-fashioned way with a crayon on leaflets of papyrus. When the point of interest shifted to my second operation they leaned forward as though by doing so they might gain a better view. What a typically fruitless human response. From my rather awkward vantage point, considering everyone in the theater could see my point of interest better than I could, I tried to pay attention and follow along. Eventually they got around to asking if they could test my responses to measure whether my newly fashioned appendage was working properly. I felt like I was performing in the matinee back at the Club Abattoir. Except anybody who knows me knows I don't like guys; since the Great Awakening females weren't allowed in med school. Try as they might those privileged fingers failed to elicit an illicit response. I was on the verge

of suggesting they bring in that fat-bottomed little nurse I'd checked out earlier but something warned me these fragile patriarchal egos wouldn't appreciate a vote of no confidence in such a delicate area. They kept on studying their handiwork as they attempted to jump start things manually and then looking expectantly at my face until I lost patient and told them to clear out of there and let me try.

From what I could tell by groping around blindly they'd done a real first-class job of it. It definitely had that brand new out of the box feel to it and all the working parts were right where you'd expect to find them. I closed my eyes, pressed the ignition button, and she started right up. At first I tried to imagine those tight fitting polyester slacks. Nadezhda insisted I think about some episode from our past instead only I invented details to add some color and verve to the picture and off we went on a wild tangent. The things you think of; I swear.

At the climactic spout of my demonstration the crowd exhaled an audible sigh of appreciation followed by a hearty round of applause. Take that, snooty Club Abattoir girls. The doctors asked if I felt okay I guess because I continued writhing around for a few moments afterwards. I let them know I was experiencing aftershocks. That remark drew a few laughs. I offered to double clutch and go for it a second time but the Chief Surgeon said no; they'd seen enough for the time being. I

suggested we put it to a vote and a fair number of the med students raised their hands without any further prompting but again the man in charge said no, this wasn't a democracy and my new apparatus wasn't a toy and then he pontificated about morality. I never understood why even some educated people felt compelled to attach grandiose metaphysical shame and guilt to what was essentially the biological urge to reproduce. As usual I wasn't allowed control over my own body as those men wheeled me away and back to my room where left to my own devices I kicked off the covers and had my way with myself in rebellion until I cried mercy.

Since in reconstructing me The Powers That Be also managed to please themselves I conspired with Hater and Nadezhda to please myself for as long as I could get away with idling at their expense. The kitchen crew I kept busy over their pots and kettles and in keeping with the doctor's orders I packed on a layer of baby fat although I was still the kind of girl you would call skinny. Scarfing potato pancakes and crepes stuffed with blueberries along with dinners of bangers and mash and lobster and champagne I proved as pliant in front of a plate full of influence as a Supreme Court justice and far more indolent if such a state of grace is possible but alas my tenure was not for life.

Once I established my land legs under me I asked permission for and gained access to the library, which those men in their citadel referred to as the Presidential Library for some reason, as fancy a collection of tomes as I'd ever seen. So nice in fact in their leather covers and gold gilt acid free pages and type fonts selected especially for their immanent style and grace and readability no one had ever possessed the temerity to take even a single volume down off the shelves and pry open the cover. They were ancient dust free volumes to be sure and so well attended in their appearance and yet so neglected as to their content they appeared brand new. As I perused their titles I grew disappointed at the bulk of books dealing with subjects like economics and political science and not one book of poetry. How could anyone hope to lead an empire without imagination let along a grounding in perceiving 'things as they are' perplexed me for several days until the obvious conclusion sputtered into sparkdom: they had not managed to govern successfully; the empire had collapsed and civilization had been lost. Lacking in imagination they failed to anticipate what the morrow would bring and if the chronicles are truthful the ancients turned away from the unpleasing truth towards a more pleasing lie with shocking regularity. Such were their whims, for if science were true their theology foundered. Better the flood waters rise to their very noses and the dust storms pile in drifts smothering

their corn crops than one word of their guiding fairy tale be called into question.

Let us not waste time appeasing the river god, the man said, let us turn instead to the study of navigation empowering us to alleviate the famine upstream. His words, not mine.

They lost the struggle for survival when they failed to appreciate how myth carries with it a poetic truth, demanding instead the myth be taken literally, quickly leading to absurdity. Empire crumbled around their ears and you couldn't imagine a more excruciating misery nor devout penance. The horrors befalling them served only to confirm their most fervent beliefs about themselves, their clearest understanding of who they were: faithless sinners deserving of punishment. When the Earth dried and cracked, the votaries they tied to the stake and burned as offerings in their writhing and howling death agonies, their ashes scattered by the dry wind, failed to conjure rain. A toilet flushed somewhere and I marveled how even in extremes they wantonly wasted water.

Flash emerged from the WC still trying to dislodge his shirt tail from the interconnecting teeth of his metallic pants zipper.

"There's a lady present," I said, giving him a hard time.

"Oh sorry," Flash apologized, spinning around to hide his ministrations. Nurse Sweetbottom and I smiled at each other.

"They're ready for you now. They scheduled you for a fitting at half passed the hour."

"I'm not fit for anything. I thought you would have figured that out by now."

"You will be soon enough. Your healing time is complete. Svelte as a woman, stronger than a man. A few questions remain, like the status of your sanity. So after the fitting we'd like to do some vetting. It's important you take their questions seriously. Your sense of humor can be confusing sometimes."

"After investing in the princess you subsequently intend to prove she has no clothes?"

Flash blinked his eyes behind the myopic prisms of those sharp edged seeing eyeglasses. "Why don't you come along with me now, and we'll get you prepped."

The ink black roach of hair, the frail body, without any leverage he had no business ordering anyone about, least of all the predator they had turned me into, the monster I had become.

Reading these thoughts from the back of my mind Hater admonished me not to hurt the boy, Flash. Hater argued more or less persuasively against my tearing the young villain limb from torso on the spot and gobbling his raw flesh. Living, quivering flesh remained the last temptation. To drink hot blood. But Hater correctly predicted I would have a chance to satisfy my newfound carnal desires soon enough.

Nevertheless, I bared my teeth at this would-be tamer of fierce creatures who entered my cage and approached giving orders armed with neither whip nor chair. Did I fail to mention the bars on my windows? Or the single exit door locked from without?

The security detail escorting us towards my fitting for a ball gown kept a discreet distance fore and aft at all times. The hallway curved and they managed to stay that much ahead. They wore sidearms, truncheons, pepper spray and the like on their utility belts. In his walking shorts and polo shirt, flat tennies and ankle socks, Flash looked even more like a little boy next to these professional thugs.

On our way we passed doors of many colors none bearing any specific markings betraying the secret goings on behind them. Secrets within secrets, so much so I wondered how they managed to accomplish anything. At the end of the long curving hallway we arrived at an elevator station where we all caught up to each other and yet stood about like a ragged collection of molecules. On the way down in the elevator the urge to bite off Flash's penis surged within me once more and I use the anatomically correct term lest you mistake my meaning. You see I wasn't feeling amorous. What I felt in the quiet of that elevator ride constituted a new emotion, or a hybrid, a cross between hunger and anger. I wanted to plunge my fangs into his neck, his

jugular, whichever soft spot pulsed ardently. If he struggled and fought back so much the better. My desire to eat him whole while he still thrived can be appreciated by anyone who has pounded a whole soda from the can before it goes flat. Without the fizzle and pop the sensation isn't the same.

The question remained as to what end Flash was leading me. A part of the answer arrived as soon as the elevator topped out and the door slid open and I was led through a series of double doors unlocked by remote control on the other side until the final steel and reinforced door Flash unlocked by poking a number pad and spinning an iron wheel like you'd expect to see on a bank vault.

"I'll wait for you here," Flash said, as the airlock exhaled and he gestured with a mannerly sweep for me to proceed alone.

"Am I coming back alive?" I asked, joking with a bitter kernel of truth. These people were capable of anything.

"Of course. Look Nika, we didn't spend the treasure and resources to rehabilitate you just so you'd be healthy enough to assassinate. Think about it. That doesn't make any sense. You're the guest of honor. Go on in. I'll be waiting right here for you when you come out."

No one in my same position could have been more philosophical about impending doom than I was in that moment.

Stepping unarmed across that threshold I expected to find myself in some kind of extermination chamber. I figured they must have realized what a monstrosity they had created and come to a decision about putting me down and cutting their loses. For as much as I didn't care about my current incarnation I must admit the extent to which the old stubbornness survived for staying alive. Reflecting on their cold scientific indifference towards me even in the space of those few steps ignited anger and I felt more than ready to hurt somebody.

I walked forward into a gladiatorial arena, only with a marble floor. Perhaps overly large petri dish might be a better description. Above the retaining wall, on the observation benches, sat the same group of white lab coats. Only the haircuts varied. Glasses, no glasses. I half expected lions to spring from a trap door and attack me. Instead two little lambs were shooed in at the opposite end of the arena. A boy and a girl. They were young and flat. Naked and hairless they could not have been more meek and vulnerable. The door closed behind them as it had behind me trapping us together in this experimental chamber.

I didn't know what the Powers That Be were hoping for. At first we remained mutually wary. We each kept to our opposite corners and then we paced the perimeter to no obvious purpose. After a couple of laps I became irritated at the apparent

pointlessness of our situation and I stopped, so they stopped. We stood regarding each other on opposite sides of the oval arena. For me the sense of danger had gone out of the situation but in their eyes I recognized the look of pure terror. Their demeanors were so similar they could have been brother and sister. Maybe they were.

To test them out I took a few steps in one direction before quickly reversing direction. The poor little creatures did the same, mirroring my advances with their flight. The grave realization swept through me I posed as the predator and they as my prey. If that was the game we were playing all I had to do was attack straight across the floor, enough of this silly round and round we go routine. I bared my fangs and they both screamed in fright.

My bare feet thudded across the floor as I bounded straight at them. They split apart and ran in opposite directions. The girl stopped and faced her doom with round empty eyes. The boy kept running and for that reason I instinctively turned in pursuit of him. I could smell the brown fear farting from his moist little bunghole. I leapt and leapt after him and just when I was about to sink my claws into him and drag him to ground he took flight like a winged angel and I leapt crazily after him but he escaped my clutches and I slammed into the wall and crumpled to the floor.

The little girl remained ground on the same spot as before so I dragged myself up and paused for a moment, gathering strength, coiling my haunches. I could see the guidewires now that I knew what to look for. I didn't need to be faster than she was; I needed to fool the unseen fisherman using her for bait. I leapt but she was reeled to safety before I got anywhere near her. Walking up under her dangling form I gnashed my teeth and she curled her toes. As long as we understood each other.

Next they dangled a hammock in my general vicinity. At this point I was no longer in a mood to be trifled with. I made a few halfhearted leaps knowing they would jerk the savory meat away in the last second, which they did each time. Finally, they allowed me to clutch it with my claws and eyeing that sweet morsel of a child I sunk my fangs deep into the surrogate and for the first time the audience responded with a collective gasp. I let go the bait and dropped to the floor before spitting out the pork flesh. It wasn't fresh or even raw. They'd cooked it clean through. Revolting.

The dangling children rose upwards and disappeared from sight through an aperture in the ceiling that closed behind them. For a moment I stood there, naked, with greasy fingers and no napkin. The ham chunk still hung there within arm's reach. No one had bothered to reel it in. The moment for passion had passed and as my head cleared I realized how underneath it all I

did in fact feel a bit peckish. To my revived taste buds
flesh dead and burned couldn't compare to flesh live and
quivering, pulsing with the sauce of life. Nevertheless, I
walked beneath the meat and reached up with my nails clawed
loose a hunk and sat down native style on the floor and emitting
a quiet sigh of resignation contented myself with tossing chunks
of swine flesh down my neck. Food as fuel.

A panel in the wall swung open revealing on its reverse
side the airlock door through which I'd originally entered the
arena and Flash leaning into the experimental space without
actually stepping onto the marble floor and beckoning for me to
come hither. My dander was up as they say for reasons not hard
to intuit and so I remained where I was reclined on the floor
until I'd finished my modest repast. Then and only then, with
the last morsel swallowed, when I felt good and ready, did I
bestir my supple frame and respond to the master's call.

The first thing I did upon reaching him was wipe my greasy
mouth and claws on his pink polo shirt. With a typical nerd's
stoicism he suffered me to violate his dignity in this manner.
He inspected the stains I'd produced and a look amounting to
real despair at their ever coming clean again crossed his
features. A part of me felt remorse for punking him. A different
part of me wanted to twist his head off at the neck and press my

lips to the spouting red fountain and draw a long and satisfying draught.

"Mind telling me what that was all about," I said, pretending to swipe clean the mess I had made of his shirt.

"We needed to see how far you'd turned. Would you really have eaten those children if you could have caught them?" Flash left off inspecting the damage I'd caused to his pretty polo.

"I don't know. I didn't really feel the urge to harm them until they ran. There's something infuriating about creatures who do that."

"Do you ever feel that kind of fury towards adults?"

"I'm feeling that kind of fury right now towards you."

"Don't hurt me," Flash chirped.

"I'm not going to hurt you, but you've got to be honest with me about what's going on around this place. What does Powersby want with me? And you've got to arrange some clothes for me."

"They want you to be a killer, a kind of biological weapon, bounty hunter, to wage war on the zombie hoards."

"A zombie hunter?"

"They feel since you're half way to being one yourself you might be able to provide some kind of special insight in a war we seem to be losing. Like maybe you could infiltrate their ranks and destroy them from an inside angle somehow. We've tried

to send our own people in undercover but they're found out every time."

"And what happens when your secret agents are found out?"

"They get ripped to shreds, eaten alive. You know: the usual. We think it might not happen to you since you're practically one of them. We're curious to find out. Actually, to be honest, we're kind of desperate. So did you feel real hunger for those kids or not?"

"Oh absolutely. Yes, I did," I said, not sure if I was lying or not. In my mind I was sure I'd never actually engage a zombie hoard in mortal combat, but if they were going to trick me out ahead of time the Wasteland could be a big playground for a game of hide and go seek. Once I freed myself from my handlers I could skip out on the whole crusade. "If you hadn't pulled them to safety, I would have torn them to pieces, I would have ground their bones to make my bread, I would have sucked the marrow of life from them both."

The killer instinct surged through my frame and I bore my fangs. Zombie killer. Killer zombie. Have it whichever way you want. Flash panicked and rabbited for the exit. Bad move. Through the exercise of immense self-control I relaxed my brain alleviating the anger and aggression.

"Don't run from me, Flash," I said in a quiet voice to the figure paused and trembling in the gangway. "Just don't run, and

you'll be safe around me. You see? I'm learning to control it, turn it off and on as necessary. I just wanted you to see I'm ready. I'm prepared for war. I'll solve your problem for you. It's the least I can do, considering how you brought me back to life and gave me a second chance. I'm Nika Savage, Zombie Killer!"

"Zombie Hunter might be a better term since technically they're already dead and you can't kill a thing that's dead."

"Girls won't like you if you're too smart, Flash. Okay, fine. Zombie Hunter. Whatever. So what do I have to do? Where do I start?"

"First, we'll get you suited up. Then you'll meet the Man himself."

Sometimes I felt as though I'd spent half my days traversing beaucroatic hallways of one sort or another. This complex must have represented the omphalos of whatever power structure still existed. This structure had obviously not been built in recent times. The quality of the building materials and the design excellence stood out as too extra fine. Nobody possessed the architectural knowhow or the resources to affect this kind of achievement. If the building wasn't destroyed in the Fall of Empire then Powersby was sure to grab it and claim it for himself. He could marshal enough slave labor to build his own pyramid no doubt so long as the work only required stacking

one block on another but you could tell by the gleam and polish of this place the seamless interconnectedness of the disparate parts adding up to the walkway smooth as glass, the flawless walls and overhang, the ancients and their education had constructed this palace. Before entering this place, I would have wagered most every building in the wasteland had been ransacked and vandalized at least once since the Empire collapsed. More than likely ruined several times over. Not this building. I'd never seen anything like it and if my surmise about its pristine inviolability were accurate then the Powersby housed in this edifice represented a line of continuity astonishing for its duration.

Down in the basement rumpus room where I thought the air felt a tad chilly they decked me in a wasteland suit of light combat armor truly cutting edge for its time. The inside shell form fitted to every contour of my body without actually making contact with my skin, not even the soles of my feet. It created the airiest floaty feeling. The next layer the technicians said would protect me from most small arms fire at a distance though they emphasized not indefinitely. The impervious factor would deteriorate over time. The outer layer camouflaged the whole operation and also served as a ventilation system. Little slits let the costume breath. I expressed my doubts about the suits functionality. Those tiny flaps made me feel, oh I don't know,

fluffy. The fellas assured me the design was state of the art and would keep me cool even in the hottest daylight temperatures while at the same time deflecting light rays in such a way as to render me almost invisible against select backdrops. Not entirely, but almost. Certain airtight tubing inserted here and there meant I would never have to remove the suit for any purpose. In deference to the delicate sensibilities of my readers I shall here refrain from elucidating the matter any further. Suffice it to change the subject by saying that the wasteland wanderer's suit came equipped with a skull tight hood. I asked if I had to wear the hood all the time. The chief technician replied by stating it would depend on how much I valued my head. In spite of his pithy response I decided to fold the head gear down in back because they really hadn't taken under consideration the length and bulk of my natty dread knots, or is it dreadnaughts? They suggested I allow them to shave my head right then and there and they looked crestfallen when I told them I would take their suggestion under advisement and get back to them with my final decision later. Flash smiled wryly at that, I guess considering how much they had done to me medically without my permission. He let me keep my hair.

They would have held me there indefinitely explaining every last detail of my new body armor if Flash hadn't intervened, saying I was due for my meeting with the Bossman and it wouldn't

do to keep the Bossman waiting. At the mere mention of his name the whole roomful of scientists and technicians bowed their heads and took one step back. Judging from their reaction I understood not only would it not do to keep the Bossman waiting tardiness might also prove unhealthy.

Once again we entered the lift whooshing us upwards to the surface world. Hallway lead unto hallway until troopers wearing battle gear intermingled with shot callers in dark slick suits and political officers in long black leather coats. The Dark Matter corporation hadn't changed their basic look in forever. Somewhere along the line I kept expecting Flash to run out of clearances and hand me over to some higher-up. I'll be darned if he didn't escort me passed several checkpoints right up to the double doors embossed with the Dark Matter emblem, a kind of Avant guard depiction of a carrion crow. At least that's what it looked like to me.

Flash opened the right door, gentleman like, and ushered me through and followed me into a foyer where if we'd had umbrellas and raincoats we might have hung them on one of several coat trees for safe keeping. But we didn't so we didn't. Not presuming to touch me he nevertheless did reach one hand out behind me while indicating with the other outstretched for me to proceed.

Not many steps separated the entryway from the sunken living room complete with slick couches in red and light green with the cleanest white carpeting I'd ever seen. The décor, vases on white pillars and paintings with broad brush strokes bursting with color, a big picture of a girl on a swing, another of a different girl holding a yellow straw hat I wished she would put on her head already, looked to me as though they had been arranged by a woman in a business suit with her hair pulled back tightly in a bun. An atmosphere so restrained and tasteful it made me want to leave a warm and steamy pile in protest.

The Boss himself rose from one of the couches to greet me as I descended the couple of steps down into the room. You couldn't help but notice his hair first: thick black on top greying discretely on the sides with a hint of sideburns. I'll never forget the way his eyes flickered a dozen different emotions, fear hiding in the corners, as though he were afraid of being found out somehow. His teeth were perfect, white and even, yet his smile curled up both sides of his head like a carved pumpkin, and he sported a square chin anchored by sharply defined jaws that begged you to vote for him. Although an older man he maintained a sturdy frame dressed in an expensive dark blue suit and white shirt open at the collar. Hard soled shoes holding a shine. He reached out and clasped my hand firmly and

grabbed my forearm with his other hand and held on in such a way it left me wondering when I should get my appendages returned.

"Greetings, my dear. I cannot tell you how happy I am to finally make your acquaintance. You know, I've heard so many excellent things about you from the scientists and the surgeons and young Flash here I couldn't wait another hour without meeting this remarkable young lady, that's you by the way, in case you were wondering, who appears to be the answer to all our prayers."

By this time I really wanted my hand back. The Boss relinquished his grasp so he could place both hands covering his heart, close his eyes, and smile a tight-lipped smile, then he came back from his reverie and leered at me as though daring me to call him a liar. The tremulous lips. The eyes shifting to cover the lies belied his pallid attempt at honesty.

"It's nice to meet you, too," I said, trying not to flinch. "I'm sorry I haven't heard anything about you in return. Nobody has told me a thing."

"Flash been keeping you in the dark, has he? Well fine, fine. Let's sit down together, shall we? And we'll do our best to fill you in on the facts and details germane to the case at hand. Please sit, sit." The creepy quotient was high with this guy.

I smiled, not sure how to respond or if I needed to say anything. I'd only heard politicians talk in videos. I'd never been this close to one.

As I sat down on the light green couch I caught sight of Flash off to one side filling a glass with ice at a wet bar. I couldn't believe this geek in a polo shirt and knee length walking shorts served as Powersby's right hand man. He handed me a drink I hadn't asked for. He disappeared for a while and when he returned he was wearing a fresh new polo. No one would mistake that skinny boy for an athlete.

"What has Flash told you about our little plan so far? Anything? What can you tell me about your goals and objectives?"

Before answering I wanted to set down my drink on the glass coffee table. Underneath the glass a human female dressed head to toe in black latex remained perfectly poised on hands and knees with the glass balanced on her back. Startled, I paused long enough for the Boss to select a cork coaster from a metallic cabbie and whip it in under my glass. Afraid of upsetting the delicate balancing act before me I set my drink down gently and found the living furniture solid as Atlas in bearing her burden underneath.

"We like to use a bumper around here when we're setting our drinks down. Otherwise a water ring forms and stains the glass

and it becomes a bother, I can tell you, for the fellow who comes along later and has to wipe it up."

I smiled unsure of how I ought to respond or whether I needed to respond at all. Apparently we were going to pretend like a breathing fellow creature wasn't holding up the glass table top.

"Sounds like a good policy," I said, trying to sound reassuring. I had a psych doctor tell me once I worried more about other people's emotions than they did.

"A good policy. Ha ha. Indeed, yes. Drinks go on the coaster. A sound policy. Flash, what do you make of our current situation? Perhaps it would be best for you to start things off and when the opportunity arises I'll interject as need be."

Flash took his cue and came back into proximity.

"Zombies have gathered in larger numbers in the far Western quadrant of the Wasteland Territory. In far larger numbers than we're used to seeing. We need someone with a special skills-set to go in there, infiltrate their numbers, and lead them, sort of pied piper like, into a nearby city where an old nuclear reactor is housed."

The boss felt his moment to intercede had arrived. "You know the story of the Pied Piper?" He reached over and tapped my shoulder with two fingers.

"I know the story." I couldn't tell him I'd read it somewhere without giving away the fact I could read. In some cultures the men would bury me up to my neck in the sand and throw rocks at my brain for containing that kind of knowledge. He must have seen the truth hiding beneath my gaze.

"You know the story? That's amazing. I'd never heard it before. Flash here had to explain the reference to me before I could understand what he meant. How did you happen to hear it?"

"Well sir, the fact is... um... er..." I actually said um and er.

"She can read," Flash interjected.

"You can read," the Boss repeated, unbelieving at first. Then I watched as his countenance hardened. "We can't be too careful with that bit of information. I'm the CEO of the Dark Matter Corporation, for Pete's sake. I can't be seen to be doing anything illegal."

"You think the shareholders would mind?" I asked, wondering whose opinion might actually matter to him.

"Corporations are people, my friend. Of course they'd mind. Hiring an educated woman? Most irregular. Most irregular, indeed. Don't get me wrong. I love women. My wife is a woman. My mother was a woman so it isn't that, per say, but the law clearly states that young girls and women shall not be educated. In fact the statutes are very clear on this point, and well they

should be. After all that law actually serves to protect women. Let's face it: they are the fairer sex, and what good did book learning ever do a woman anyway? It only serves to deform her natural beauty and gentle nature."

In my brain Hater and Nadezhda were struggling together at the same time to prevent me from committing malicious mayhem. Nadezhda smiled her sweetest smile and Hater barred me from the windows. I could have drunk hot blood.

"Perhaps in this one case an exception might be made," Flash suggested, "Considering the time and effort we've already put into this project. Besides, when she was taught to read she was a different person, and now, well, she's an exceptional person. Our favorite new weapon. No one needs to know she's educated. She's kept it under her hat so far. I'm sure it won't become an issue." He looked to me for verification. "It won't become an issue, will it Nika?"

"No, I won't tell soul," Nadezhda said. "I never tell."

"You know the matter of exceptions came up at a meeting not two days ago. This was a private meeting, of course, behind closed doors. Flash my boy, as you well know, at that time I strenuously asserted I do not believe in making any exceptions when it comes to educating the little ladies, and so for the record, let me reiterate, I believe in exceptions only when the

life of the woman is about to be put in danger. So you see, my position has always been the same and remains unchanged."

I looked back and forth between the expectant expressions on the two men's faces and had to confess, "I'm a little confused."

"Don't be," the Brave Capitalist said, reaching over and tagging away my doubt. "Go on the mission and lure the zombie horde into Sun City, set the detonator on the old reactor tower, and let the trickle down begin." Revealing his teeth in two long rows, the crocodile smiled.

"Won't the current citizens of Sun City mind?"

"There are no legitimate citizens of Sun City," the Boss declared flatly.

"It's a dead city," Flash supplied.

"A dead city," the Boss echoed. "Not a soul alive, and that's a great tragedy, but by annihilating the zombie hoard, you will right a great wrong and raise up a mushroom cloud in their memory. Turn the desert sand to glass as a memorial."

Taking a meeting had never been my strong suit. Outloud I had always been a girl of very few words and sitting on the couch with that vulture motivated me to listen and agree with any proposal he might make if it would bring this business to a close and put me back on the wasteland. Not that being out there

was such a great deal, but anything would have been better than staying here with this cretin.

"I'm for you," I blurted out, suddenly realizing they were both staring at me and waiting for a response. "Tell me what I'm supposed to do, and I'll do it."

The look of satisfaction on Skip's face could not have been more revealing. Relief passed into pride and arrogance at once again having closed the deal successfully.

They had all sorts of plans and strategies laid out for me. Basically, they expected me to infiltrate the horde and lure them into the city's skeletal remains where I was to locate the old nuclear reactor and place a bomb setting into motion a minor meltdown wiping out the pestilence for good without, according to them, causing any permanent damage to anything worthwhile. A meltdown without environmental damage? It's how those guys thought, or didn't think. I clenched my teeth and smiled, hoping my jaw line wasn't flexing.

In an orgy of dishonesty I agreed to every contingency they proposed. Like the sin eater of old I gorged on their mendacity, absorbing every particle of their twisted vision, wondering the while what I would really do with a backpack full of provisions and the entire wasteland as a hiding place. Maybe nodding along with their plans was also easy because a part of me was lured by the prospect of creating chaos out of order. If they loaded me

down with special weaponry I have to admit by that epoch I would have been sorely tempted to do some blasting. In the area of pop guns and other noise makers The Powers That Be spared no expense and did not disappoint. Let's face it: a conservative would starve a baby to death if it meant he could grasp a few more shekels, but when it comes to paranoid defense spending they will borrow money they can't repay to lavish spending on armaments to protect themselves.

Our initial getting to know you conference concluded with shaking the man's hand. He clasped and hung on again, his other hand clutching my arm near the elbow and he locked onto me with those aqueous eyes shimmering with deceit. My fight or flee instinct palpitated in my heart, or perhaps it was simply revulsion. I didn't want him touching me anymore. There was something unclean about it. I wanted him to let go. Break contact. Eventually he did, and the relief I felt made me realize that for as long as he had me in his grip I had held my breath against the restoration of my freedom. The urge to tear out his jugular bottled up inside of me something fierce until my limbs trembled with the effort of self-control. That potent energy fizzled and turned flat and left me feeling bad about myself and everybody else in the world as I continued to smile and curtsy. Ostensibly we parted not only as friends but coconspirators, a band of brothers bent towards victory over a

zombie tyranny when underneath it all Big Mister Man, aka Skip Honor, aka Powersby, made my skin crawl. What a creep.

Hours collected into days and in my mind the impression grew they felt incertitude about letting me go unsupervised. The whole time I engaged in their training I could feel their gazes following my every gesture. So I willed my body into the shape of toned muscles and yet retained the voluptuousness to fill the space their looking delineated. Both passive and aggressive I strolled, stalked, crept and leapt, sauntered into the bath area where I disrobed for them all to see. They marveled at my transformation and the legend shared between their enfeebled minds enchained by ignorance and superstition averred I was a shape shifter capable of embodying man and woman both, never understanding nor appreciating the role of Powersby in shaping my appearance by means of a scalpel. Those poor deluded sex slaves believed me to be some sort of demiurge incarnate when in reality I constituted a scientific aberration the walking dead might hopefully mistake as one of their own.

Amid the hanging plants and pinions, the marble floors and balustrades, I wandered alone but never lonely. With me for companionship I carried a weighty tome composed in ancient tones by one of the Masters. Pulling up a rug and a pillow shaped like a mushroom cap in some hallucinatory dream I reclined and loafed and read aloud and at a certain periphery my auditors coalesced

mesmerized by my magic incantations and sometimes I improvised whole cantos singing of the Warrior Woman a ghost in a battered and beleaguered shell who haunted the wasteland in search of her demon lovers.

For my aberrant behavior I thought they had changed their minds and sought to destroy me the day they sent x number of bee keepers in white protective suits to lasso my neck and bind my wrists and ankles and carry me towards a gilded cage. As it turned out they planned to set me loose, a whirling dervish, someplace distantly safe from their own castle walls, a creature containing all the loyalty of mustard gas released to the four winds.

When they came for me they attacked full force with every intention of taking me alive. They carried long poles with long nooses extending from the ends they expertly slipped around my neck wrists and ankles pushing and pulling in an awkward manner as though I were the nucleus of a chemical compound not found in nature. I wasn't fighting to resist them so much as struggling to maintain my footing and my dignity.

Finally, I declared, "I'm not resisting you. Tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it!"

"We want you to walk towards the exit." The lead trooper's voice reverberated through his battle mask. "I want you to

follow my lead, this way," and he tugged on the pole connected to my neck.

I tried to make a step in the right direction the best I could but was hindered by the two pole jockeys tethered to each leg.

"Come on, fellas, work with me here," I said. A few steps more and we made some strides towards working in concert. We formed a most ungainly porcupine, a phalanx in reverse. In small clusters the other slaves gawked and their amazement and horror at the spectacle. A couple of dominas in full regalia high stepped at a distance demarcating an ellipsoid orbit keeping the slaves back and preventing interference, though rescue from that docile quarter appeared unlikely.

Once I stumbled and pitched forward; pinioned I never hit the floor. The troopers sustained me, which I thought was descent enough. I offered to go peacefully but the lead man abjured. We were making progress, and they were enjoying their role in our bondage performance.

At the end of the ramp stood a blue plastic cage on the back of a white six wheeled moon carriage. They negotiated me into its cold interior smelling of newly molded plastic and outside air wafting in through ingenious slits positioned along the side, and once I was safely ensconced they raised the gate

behind me and clamped it shut before daring to loosen their nooses.

I rubbed my neck and wrists to restore circulation. Maybe not a strictly necessary message, but it felt good. Maybe my ministrations had more with restoring ownership. As a parting shot one of those trooper rogues shoved his pole at me and poked me hard on the hip. Lashing out I grabbed ahold of his stick with both hands and yanked so forcefully I dragged his arms inside the cage. I dropped the pole and lunged for his arms which he retracted before I could rip them loose from his shoulders. I grabbed his noose pole again and wouldn't let go, playing tug of war with the clown, rendering him tearfully angry. One of the rogue's colleagues jabbed at me from behind forcing me to relinquish my hold. They both withdrew their slaver tools and in defiance I threw my body first against one side and then the other of my human cage. Dashing from side to side I managed to leverage teetering and rocking to the point it almost tipped over with me inside. I could hear a crew of disembodied voices crying, "Hold! Hold!" I didn't stop thrashing about until I heard someone calling my name and recognized the voice as belonging to Flash. The men around the vehicle were very upset I think on a purely professional level. A crate of this size falling off the back of a truck with the precious cargo

inside. Not good. My tirade subsided and my crate slammed to rest.

Flash's face appeared in shifting geometric segments via the air holes in the side of the cage.

"Settle down, Nika," he said, coaxing and soothing like. "You'll tip yourself over, and then you'll be in a fix. Sit still and maintain your balance."

"Tell them to stop teasing me," I said, and tears welled up at the pathetic tone of my plea.

"Sargent, would you do something with your men, please?" I heard Flash politely order someone. A far harsher and more stentorian voice barked out a string of obscenity laden commands impugning the chastity and prudence of the mothers who gave birth to them. Given the low and vulgar nature of that outburst I found the corrective more disquieting than the original offense. "There, there now. They won't bother you again."

Curling into the fetal position at the bottom of the cage I cried out, "You're so mean!" I was temporarily nonplussed by how heartfelt, and how lame, my protest sounded. "Why are you treating me this way? I thought we had a deal."

"We do have a deal," Flash said, in a confidential tone just above a whisper. "No one expected you to grow so powerful so quickly. You made The Powers That Be nervous that you might go rogue and turn against them. They want you deployed into the

field as soon as possible. If you think about it, you might realize they're paying you a huge compliment. You're like a secret weapon they want to keep under wraps until the time comes to spring you on the enemy. You really ought to be flattered they've taken so many precautions. It's a sign of respect."

Rolling onto my back and crossing my ankles I spoke to my cages smooth blue ceiling. "Oh believe me, I feel flattered and respected." Laying my hands across my belly I interlaced my fingers. "Flash, anybody ever tell you you're completely full of it?"

The impropriety of my remark stunned him for a moment. Several seconds elapsed before he found his voice again.

"You don't have to get personal," Flash feebly protested. "I'm kind of shocked, really."

"There's more where that came from," I said. To escape further censure, I changed the subject. "What do you plan on doing to me?"

Sounding surprised, Flash said, "we're sticking to the original plan. We're taking you to the Wasteland where we'll drop you off at the frontier of zombie territory so you can carry out your mission."

"You could just point the way and say good luck?" As I questioned him I rolled onto my palms and knees slouching toward

the cab end of the cage where I sat with my back to the wall and struggled to make sense of the rough treatment meted to me.

"You need to understand what a special weapon you are for us," Flash said searching among the air holes and the slits high and low until he found a group collated at about the level of my head. Even though I could only see fragments of him I could tell he knelt on the float bed on a narrow strip between the cage and the edge. "We need to protect our investment. We need to reduce the numbers of variables by ensuring your safe transport to the drop spot. We've put too much time and money into your training to leave the success of the whole project to chance."

"And the nooses? And the cage?"

"You are a slave still, correct? Under contract to the Dark Matter Corporation. Look at it this way: You're being given a rare opportunity to earn your freedom; if all goes well, if you complete the mission successfully, then freedom is on the table."

"And if I head for the hills and never come back?"

"We will hunt you down and kill you. We'll put a price on your head and encourage the Wasteland to hunt for you, too."

"Don't hold back, Flash. Tell me what the real plan is."

"It's no laughing matter, Nika. Once we release you from the cage two bounty hunters will escort you to the outskirts of the Zombie Territory, both to protect you against outside

interference of whatever kind, random marauders or what not; or to kill you yourselves if you deviate from the plan in any way." He must have read the perturbation in my countenance because he laid off the whip and proffered a carrot, saying, "Keep in mind what I said before, though. If the mission's a success and you return safely, you can write your own ticket here at the Citadel."

"Including the right to be left alone?"

"Sure, I suppose, but why would you want to be left alone? Wouldn't you get lonely?"

"No, by a quirk in my nature I don't get lonely."

I could see the quizzical expression playing across his visage as Flash contemplated my odd revelation. Finally, he left off trying to make sense of my penchant for solitude, saying instead, "Listen, I'm sure you'll be able to negotiate whatever lifestyle you want. Because if you do eradicate the zombie presence out there, that will be huge. I mean, a real game changer."

Flash rose to a standing position enabling him with one eyeball to peer down at me through a single air hole. "So sit tight, okay? No more bouncing off the walls trying to upset the payload. Stay relaxed like you are right now, and we'll get this mission underway before you know it."

Baring my sharp ivories I glared at Flash from beneath my brow and snapped my clicking teeth. Saliva slipped over my lip and dribbled off my chin. I didn't bother wiping it away until the rivulet turned cold and annoying. To my surprise Flash allowed a couple of his fingers to curl inside one of the air holes as he clung for balance onto the outside of the cage. If I'd been coiled on my hands and feet instead of rooted on my bottom I calculated I could have beaten his reaction time right away. As it happened he provided ample opportunity for me to scramble and leap when the hustle bustle of the caravan preparing to move out drew away his attention. My razor-sharp teeth clamped just above his second knuckle belonging to his middle and ring fingers. Without breaking the skin I bit hard enough to prevent his withdrawal. My tongue detected more sugar than salt. I know you would expect man meat to be salty but to my taste buds it always tasted sweet, unless you cooked it first, of course. In an odd way too I could taste the panic surging through his system, kind of like the acidic taste in asparagus.

"Nika, don't! Please don't!" He whispered like a little boy begging for mercy.

I released my bite and he flailed away, flapping his arms as he fell over the side of the flatbed and flopped sideways on the dirt. Thrusting my tongue through the air hole and wriggling

it around to pick up any scent wafting by; the dock workers were sweet scented dandies in their uniform overalls at least in comparison to the troopers whose sweat and dirty bottoms set them apart not to mention their dangelaries practically speaking to me with voices of the their own. I withdrew my sensory organ when I picked up the taint my two escorts expired. Though they were standing side by side several yards away I could tell them apart by their respective stench. The fatter one hadn't washed for weeks and every roll of fat secreted his grimy whereabouts during that time. The slightly less fat one had been intimate with some species of fur bearing animal as recently as this morning.

"Looks like you made a friend there," Fat Man said, and everyone enjoyed laughing at the fallen villain lying in the dust.

Surveying the scene through a peep hole I spied crates full of water canisters. I'd been vaguely aware of their proximity as objects the whole time but now they drew my full attention because I really desired to rinse out my mouth. I had to hand the prize to the Dark Matter Corporation: wherever they traveled they went first cabin. Flash stood up dusting himself off. I told him to fetch me a water and he did it to give himself something to do other than stand there looking foolish. I'd only been playing. If I'd wanted to bite off his fingers I could

have. He fell off the truck by his own clumsiness. In abject servitude I remained defiant. Flash passed me the sleek metallic canister through a slide drawer and I popped the top. Without touching my lips to the rim I poured a stream into my mouth. The contents tasted reconstituted but I mean that in the best way possible. I'm sure the aquifer they pulled from preserved the highest quality to begin with and so I felt equally sure the boys and girls in the white hard hats and trench coats had spared none of their funding while tracking down, identifying, and eliminating any microscopic trace elements of the rotten old Empire.

Hater told me in caves the world over they were plunging a dip stick into the last subterranean reserves and the dip sticks registered mostly empty and I believed him because although he may have been a tad verbose he never said the thing that was not so; somehow he always remained in the know about the most pertinent facts pertaining to our impending extinction. When he expressed a desire to test the purity level it struck me as so typically nerdy Hater what amounted to no more than a snort caused a major up chuck and I ended up spraying the inside of my ghoul carrier with a mist of some of the finest drinking water extent on the planet. Of course being little miss prim and proper pleasure slave, Nadezhda admonished me not to be so unladylike in my demeanor. I protested to her it was Hater who

made me laugh because he was such a nerd. Hater said sometimes I acted really immature. That made me mad and I let them know I really didn't appreciate how the two of them were always ganging up on me. Nadezhda switched tactics and remonstrated with me about wasting such pristine drinking water and I had to concede the point; they'd added real artificial lemon flavoring like they did in those days only in this instance it wasn't a second distinct oily entity swirling around independent of the water; the lemon flavor was clean and crisp and while you could definitely taste it you couldn't sense it on your tongue. The best attribute had to be the bubbles. They'd injected bubbles into the mix so that when the mix hit the back of your throat the bubbles burst cleansing the wasteland dust and quenching your thirst.

"Who the hell's she talking to?"

Unbeknownst to me, while I'd been sampling the fancy water, the two bounty hunter escorts had sidled up next to my cage and peeked in at me through the air holes. Apparently my colloquy with my friends had been out loud although I had no memory of it being so. The slightly younger slightly less fatty one had been the one who spoke. Their rude intrusion into my inner world jarred me as though they'd walked in on me in the act of some illicit pleasure like masturbation or reading. Corking the bottle, I dropped it back into the supply crate before leaping

across my cage and landing erect on all fours against the wall and snarling snapping and growling and just about tipping over the whole show. In the face of my ferocity they both staggered backward. Skinny turned and trotted away a few paces. Not fatty, though. He brought his sawed-off shotgun down from his shoulder where he'd been resting it and placed both hands on it in the ready position. Putting my eyeball to one of the holes I wondered with delight whether or not he'd be stupid enough to pull the trigger and blow a hole in my cage. I heard the metal springs tightening and squeaking and knew the answer was yes. I flung myself away to the far corner of the cage and flattened my body and ducked my head to protect my eyes. I heard the click as the hammer landed and then the ka-pow as the explosion detonated. I smelled the rock salt as it approached the outer wall where it smashed into a saline mist, a few whole salt nuggets flying through the air hole by chance.

As a result of this uncivil exchange I learned two very important pieces of information: Little Boy was a coward under pressure, and Fat Man could be counted on to become angry and lose his sense of reasoning. Something about guys who wield shotguns; they're big and loud and it's all up front; they try to annihilate you right away because they don't want a prolonged struggle. The longer they fight the more likely they

are to lose, so shock and awe up front, but once they've shot their load they've got nothing.

Fat Man engaged in a vile synecdoche, naming my moist middle to represent my whole being. In response I impugned his mother's hygiene. Later on there'd be a price to pay with those two for that vulgarity. In the moment though I abandoned caution.

I heard the zap stick extending and then I smelled its burning metallic point. He already had it through one of the air holes and extended to its full length angling for me in the corner where I crouched. I saw the one wild eye pressed to an aperture and the fear and petulance in his bloated being as he sought to stick me with his electrode. I crept low then leapt high but the villain whipped his prod after me and caught me a sharp tap on the kidney. Snarl crackle snap the spark jolted me into flying down cage where I crashed and crumpled against the end wall. The new suit I wore absorbed some of the blow but not all. The shock stick recoiled long enough for me to grab that water canister pop the top and jam it onto the end when he jabbed it at me for another jolt. I could barely hear Hater's discourse on water and metals and electricity and polarities above the din of Fat Man screaming and dancing backward until he fell off the truck and landed flat on his back breaking the connection. The zap stick rattled on by itself escaping the cage

under its own power until it wiggled free of the water canister and fell inert outside on the ground.

Immediately I screamed for Flash because when that guy recovered from the shock he would be driven to kill. Elf Boy came running up with enough troopers to prevent Fatty Globulous from exterminating me. I don't know how to explain this exactly but I could hear the snot bubbles popping out his nose and the saliva strings trailing from his blubbering lips as he cradled his burned right hand and imprecated demons from hell to drink my hot blood as the troopers held him back.

I pressed my face to the airholes and I heard Flash a few steps away ask, "What did you do to him?"

"He imposed upon my modesty, Flash. Keep him away from me."

"Okay, I will, but can you calm down now for a little while?"

I spoke with a tongue of madness. "I need more water, darling boy. He wasted some of mine. You know what a precious commodity water is in the wasteland. Flash? Who's your favorite goblin, him or me?"

"You're my favorite, Nika. You're the whole mission. Listen, I'll get you more water to replace what he wasted, but please please please stand back, sit down, and try to relax."

"Oh I'm going to sit down, Flash. I'm sitting down. See me? Here I am taking a seat, and I will relax but you've got to keep

that creep off me. You better have a serious man to fatty, sit down talk about this mission's priorities. What? Okay, I'll let him know." I spoke loudly to the disembodied voice outside the cage. "And one more thing."

"Yes, Nika? What is it? What can I do for you? Anything, so long as you calm down and stay calm." Flash spoke soothingly to me in a way I liked.

"Oh I'm calm, Flash. Don't worry about me. But you need to let Ton o' Fun out there know that his potty mouth is not appreciated in certain quarters, and if he persists in using that kind of language in the presence of a lady, there's going to be real trouble."

I'm not sure you can really hear a dejected air. Maybe it was just the cartilage in his neck popping as he bowed his head in response to my admonition.

"Anything else?"

"Not at this time. Just deliver that message... and my water... oh oh oh! And some of those honey flavored protein bars that are so yummy.

"Anything else?"

"No, that's all. Keep him away from me Flash. It's your job to protect me and stop him from upsetting me. Think of the mission."

"I hear you, Nika. I know."

"Good, Flash, I'm glad to hear it. Look at me, Flash. I'm calm and I'm sitting down."

"Good, Nika. Glad to hear it."

"Flash?"

"Yes, Nika?"

"My water? And honey flavored protein bars?"

"There should be a box of supplies in there for you already."

"Honey flavored, Flash. I'm not joking around here."

Sitting with my back to the wall I stretched my legs and crossed them and tried to relax my muscles and order my thoughts. The quiet interlude ended when the barking in the distance resolved into the sound of a man shouting and I blushed to realize the fat fool was clamoring for my severed head on a pike. Some people are like that after they're enraged or beaten. They try to make up for their disgrace through voluble but empty bravura. As though loud-mouthed grandstanding in front of his friends would somehow reverse the shame of my punking him. A few scraps, words and phrases, clarified in my consciousness. In reality I couldn't be bothered. Access denied.

Soon after dirty engines fired and filthy exhaust thickened in the air. Flash appeared at the far end of my case. He had my protein bars, a whole box of them, and two new water canisters to replace the single one I had lost. I vaulted onto my belly

and slunk towards him. He placed the items in the safety drawer and shoved them through to my side. I rose to collect my guerdon, stowed it with the other supplies, and crept back to my former position.

"Try to relax, Nika. Save your strength. You're going to need it."

"Keep that fat boy off me, Flash. The minute you turn your back he'll come at me again, and when he does, there's going to be trouble."

"I don't want trouble," Nadezhda said, and it made me mad to hear the fear in her voice.

"Nika, promise me you won't start anything. Think of the mission. Focus on our goal of wiping out the zombie hoard."

Think of the mission. What a putts, like I gave a damn about Powersby's megalomania.

"I promise not to start anything, but I also promise you that if he comes at me I'm going to protect himself."

Flash guffawed. "I doubt he'll be coming at you again anytime soon."

"Let's do this thing, Flash. Oscar Mike. Let's roll out. I'm sick and tired of sitting here, waiting."

"We're minutes away, Nika." He paused to think before he spoke again. "You're going to do great. Just stick to your training, deliver the payload, and we'll all come out on top."

The truck sputtered alive and Flash leapt down, his pregame pep talk apparently over. As a girl I was never allowed to play sports so I don't know if he gave good pep or not. Not much of a vehicle aficionado either, I hadn't paid much attention to the various other desert cruisers parked around the utility vehicle transporting my cage to the drop point. Two very slick tortoise shells accelerated past the main event where I was sitting. The hard shell was the only aspect in common with a turtle. In terms of speed and agility they were more like a pair of pumas. What they called a crocodile, a hard-shelled troop carrier, rumbled in behind carrying the boots on the ground, a dozen maybe, maybe more. Usually this type of battalion prowled in gangs of nine. Bringing up the rear a turret car called a Blockhead spun its guns 360 degrees before settling its attention on the rear flank. I knew a second Blockhead drove ahead of us, too, but I couldn't see it from my cage. Low and behold a dirty four-wheel Scavenger appeared careening across the desert and vibrating wildly as it went and streaming a dust wake in mad pursuit of our main convoy.

As we pulled away from the combat base I could see the building resembled a concrete bunker rising a sole outpost with the main castle a mile away in the background, optically reduced to the same size although in reality a much larger building. I marveled at the length and breadth of their tunnel network until

the two bounty hunters in their ramshackle dune buggy lunged into view again trying to pass the troop carrier on a road precariously narrowing. I leapt to the back of my cage and watched in delight as the Crocodile, either oblivious of their intention or maybe out of sheer spite refused to make room and forced them onto the shoulder. I was amazed their suspension didn't snap. Something had to give and Fat Man had to drive off the road and land all four tires on the desert floor. They veered off and kicked up a plume of dust and then ate some dust traveling off road parallel to the troop convoy. They seemed determined to form the vanguard even though none of the troopers seemed to notice or care. They weren't total clowns by any means. They were killers and I knew it would be a mistake not to take them seriously. Watching the professional troopers cold shoulder those mercenaries kept me pressed to the side of my carrier. As they bottomed out at top speed off road they managed to hold steady and gain on the convoy. Little Boy looked over and caught sight of my caged figure eyeballing him. In his eyes I could see a blistering urge to kill. I wagged my tongue at him through the glory hole. In reaction he reached into the back section of the buggy the wind whipping his greasy matted hair and extracted a high powered sniper rifle, the kind with a scope. I leapt away from that side of the cage, not at all confident he wouldn't take a pot shot at me. There was no point

in testing his stupidity. With my body pressed to the bottom of the plastic carrier I didn't see which gun spoke. A high caliber barrel fired a burst poka poka poka and I saw a plume of dust rising in the air and scrambled to the end to peek out and just catch sight of the buggy brakes locked skidding to a halt and disappearing from sight. The troopers must have seen him training that rifle on my carrier and fired a warning shot across their bow. After all, for all intents and purposes, I was the mission. Not them. I also speculated the troopers might have blown them away out of impatience until the convoy curved on a long arch of road headed for the mountains and I could once again spy the two mongrels in their rattle trap jalopy riding dust deserts and keeping a safe distance. Both miscreants had colored handkerchiefs covering their noses and mouths to keep out the dirt. I could just make out the barrel of that rifle whose butt wedged between the seats.

As we completed the arch the whole landscape rotated and the green and brown vegetation dotting the desert settled back into place under a new orientation. To kill time I broke into the box of protein bars and helped myself to a couple and grabbing one of those fancy water canisters settled down with my back leaning against the front end facing backward and enjoyed a light repast. As I munched I mused on the amount of weeny wagging these males had exhibited thus far this morning and I

ruminated that it was no longer in my best interest to antagonize those two jackals. I'd driven a wedge far enough to split the pack already. The troopers had already demonstrated, undoubtedly at Flash's orders, a willingness to kill those two to protect me. If I continued to antagonize those vermin I might inspire a fire fight, which might prove interesting, but without a weapon of my own I could only act as the bait, and the whole enterprise took on too much uncertainty. Better set off on the mission, I reasoned, and hope the troopers would prevent those two tapeworms from shooting me in the back. The whole crew were knocking me out with their seemingly endless supply of live ammunition. When I lay down on the bottom of the cage I never expected I'd be able to fall asleep but that's exactly what happened.

I woke up because the convoy merged onto of the Empire's ancient highways and the difference in surface material caused the tire whine to pitch upwards. Given the broader path those two idiots lost no time in renewing their intent of passing the convoy. When they passed by I lay flat on my stomach and turned my head to observe. I didn't want to make eye contact. They sure did. Their eyes were opaque with hatred. Nika Savage, making friends wherever I go. They won the staring contest. I blinked slowly before slithering away in defense. Apparently satisfied for the moment they accelerated towards the front of the convoy.

As we reached the mountain incline the road conditions worsened and the caravan slowed considerably. By the time we reached the summit the deterioration of the asphalt slowed the convoy into low gear. Sand slopped away on either side as we crested the summit and rolled downhill. The road disappeared under a sand slough and then reemerged. For a while we picked up speed again only to slow down to a crawl later on. We traveled in this manner until the sun set and headlights switched on and we continued through the darkness. I lay flat again to prevent the Crocodile's lamps from shining in my eyes, really annoying.

Flash finally spotted a flat acre he liked large enough to accommodate all the vehicles and so we stopped for the night. I mused at the ancient instinct to pull to the side of the road for the night. My nocturnal proclivities told me now was the time to keep traveling, while the sun was down and the air cooler, but nobody asked me, so whatever.

The other drivers circled their vehicles sparsely around mine to create a camp perimeter. The fetid buggy they shunned outside the pale since they were mercenaries and the troopers maintained military balance and posture as a part of their discipline. Even though they wielded considerable fire power, ammunition and all, the troopers would not allow for a campfire in the open Wasteland. No point in attracting every freak out there wandering in the darkness. They relied on their primers to

cook a hot meal in dwarfish kettles filled with food like substances from their silvery ration pouches. As a collective they were conscientious enough to include me in their meal. They weren't about to let me out of my cage but they did slide a fair portion to me through the safety drawer. The soldier tasked with the delivery appeared to be no more than a boy his blushing ears enflamed. I thanked him through one of the small apertures and in return he bowed and called me Ma'am. When he returned to his mates they teased him about his desire to have sex with the creature in the cage and their ribaldry revealed the poor boy suffered from a near terminal case of virginity. Their banter about me wasn't entirely uncomplimentary. In the desert night under a firmament full of sparkling pin holes I could hear every word they were saying and I accepted their whisperings as a sign of respect or at the very least discretion, notwithstanding the horny boy subject matter and their wild surmises concerning what surprises my terrain suit might conceal. They closed me out as a topic of discussion rather quickly I think because they scared themselves with the vividness of their own imaginations like little boys in a pup tent telling ghost stories by torchlight driven into a paroxysm of panic by the coincidental hooting of an owl.

I didn't mean to yawn. The sound I emitted twisted into a snarl. Their hushed tones halted. I thought well enough because

I felt tired and wanted to sleep. I felt like saying go to bed you boys. They'd supplied me with a pillow and blanket and I was just burrowing under the blanket when Flash appeared next to my cage peering in through the air holes and asking if I was set for the night or did I need anything more. I answered that I was fine for the nonce and would he please thank the troopers for taking such good care of me. I paused before adding, especially the cute young trooper who brought me my supper. Flash assured me he would deliver the message; I lay my head back and waited.

Sure enough, after a brief interval a whoop and holler burst from the troopers as well as all manner of back slapping hilarity. My particular brand of mischief meeting with success one last time for the day, I smiled contentedly, lay me down my head to rest, and fell asleep.

Sometime in the night I was awakened by the sound of footsteps crunching on the sand and a shadowy presence prowling about at the entrance to my cage. Staying flat on my belly I spun around and readied to leap for the ceiling if one of those two troglodytes had snuck up to do me some mischief. Once my eyes adjusted to the dark I could plainly see my benefactor, the young trooper, standing opposite the door and peering into my dark interior then spinning about checking for any of his comrades lest he be detected before once more trying to discern me in the dark. I realized my night vision allowed me to see him

perfectly whereas he couldn't make me out in the darkness at all. Behind him glowed the night stars, each one surrounded by a corona of a sickly greenish hue, and the virgin soldier himself a living glowstick radiating a light of his own. I could certainly see better in the dark than I used to in my earlier days. Silently I crept towards the cage door then thought differently and sidled off to one side and curled up in the corner where he would never see me. So as not to startle him I breathed in deeply. He froze at the sound, and I exhaled wearily to give him the impression I was just waking up. My ploy succeeded. Rather than panicking he grew more curious, leaning his face in closer to the bars.

"Hello, brave soldier," I whispered.

"Are you there? Are you awake? Where are you? I can't see nothing."

"I'm here in the dark. Where else would you like me to be?"

"Oh, I don't know, Ma'am. I just come by to check and see if you was okay."

"How very thoughtful of you," I purred, circling about a bit so that I could rise up face to face with him without startling the charity from his heart. "Hello, Handsome. To what do I owe the pleasure?" In the darkness behind him I heard a pair of tittering schoolboys and then I saw them over his

shoulder. "Who's there," I asked, feigning concern. It was a dance I knew the steps to all too well.

He twisted around and tried to shush his buddies with a frantic wave of his hands. "Oh, it's nobody, Ma'am," he said, returning his attention to face me. "Just a couple of damn fools who don't know when they aint wanted."

"Why don't you make them go away so you and I can be alone."

"You want for us to be alone?" He said, and his cute little Adam's apple jiggled deliciously.

"I want for you to come in here with me for a while, so we can be alone together."

"Wait there one minute. I'll be right back," and the poor young virgin spun around and trotted back to his buddies in search of their council. Mutant sex was still illegal, as far as I knew, but everyone was doing it. Of that you can be sure. They held a muffled powwow for a few moments before breaking their huddle and all three advanced to my door. The alpha trooper spoke first.

"Okay, creature, here's the deal: if we open this cage door to let our little buddy in, you're not going to try to escape or nothing, agreed?" His speech was half an appeal, half a threat.

I retreated from the door in order to show good faith and instill confidence. "I don't want to escape. I want to stay

right here. I don't want to get out. I want you to send in my young chevalier.

There was a hurried debate about whom I meant. "You're not going to hurt him, are you?" The other taller, thinner soldier demanded. I think the alpha male almost hoped I would.

"Of course not," I said. "I won't hurt him. I promise to be gentle." My lips curled in a smile and my white teeth glowed in the dark. A general shifting about of their feet ensued.

The tall motherly soldier with the pointed face wasn't entirely satisfied. "Why're you doing this? What you want in return?"

"You don't have anything I want," I said soothingly. "Listen, give me a break. I'm only human, mostly. We're all on the same mission. As soon as we reach the insertion point they're going to let me out of this cage and I'm going to go and perform a personal favor for President Powersby. I'm not kept in here because I'm dangerous. It's more like for safe keeping."

"That was our understanding, too," Alpha Dog cut in to hasten the negotiations. "So if I unlock this gate for a moment to let my boy in, you won't try to escape, and you'll be nice to him, take good care of him?"

"I'll cure what ails him. You want him to die in combat out here in this hell hole while he's still a virgin?"

In unison, all three answered no.

Alpha Boy fumbled with his keys while Mother patted her Virgin Son on the shoulder and then took a few steps back to train the muzzle of his weapon on the entrance to the cage in case I changed my mind and tried to rush the exit. To avoid any unfortunate misunderstandings I moved as far back as I could get. Young Billy the Virgin Trooper handed his weapon and helmet over to his big brothers for safekeeping, opened the gate himself, and climbed in.

"It's mighty nice of you..."

"Hush, and don't talk so much, darling. Let's get you undressed first so there's no awkwardness. No, don't try to help me. My suit comes off in one piece and it's better if I do it myself."

"Ma'am, you got purty teeth."

"The better to eat you with, my dear."

"Pardon, Ma'am?"

"Never you mind. Now be a good boy and lie down on your back. Look at you, soldier! You're already at attention."

"They gimme me a pill for it."

"Now why would a healthy young specimen like you waste your time on such a thing?"

"My buddies said I'd last longer."

"Do you do everything your buddies tell you to?"

"Yes'm, on account of their my buddies, an we look out for each other."

"You precious boy. Now lie still and... oops! That was fast."

"I'm sorry man. I done ruined everything."

"You ruined nothing. That is exactly the desired result. You just relax, Sunny Jim. We're only getting started."

So saying my tail curved around my side and I took hold of its bulbous and reptilian head and slipped it into my mouth. The sensation of devouring myself was delectable. Then that recalcitrant appendage ran amok very much of its own volition disappeared ducking low between the boy's thighs in search of that moist aperture. When it located his fundament it burrowed, not in a rapid or hurried manner, not in a rapish way but by thinning and thrusting, pulsing and tugging until the boy found himself pinned down and penetrated up to his warm entrails. To silence his crooning I slid my prodigious tongue down his throat and messaged his larynx. His nostrils flared with each belabored breath until we shared oxygen; thus a succubus keeps her victim alive to prolong the pleasure.

He passed through the numbered phases of pleasure: reluctance, relaxation, tension, orgasm, shame (also known as regret) protestation, tears, surrender, which is really just reluctance again as the whole process begins again. After several trips around the world he tried turning frosty on me to

get me to stop but I melted him like the polar ice cap soon enough. Maybe I ruined him. I don't know that I did. I didn't mean to. One thing remains certain: searching the world over he'd never find my equal.

Working towards the last of my implosions I felt tempted by the strange desire to crack his skull and devour his brain. As my gyrations picked up speed one more time my pleasure was piqued by tugging at his head although not violently enough to detach it. By that time the boy lay barely conscious so I don't think my fumbling attempts at decapitation made a lasting impression. Afterwards, I gave myself a sponge bath and him one, too, dressed him again in his little trooper outfit and poured him out of my cage door plopping onto the desert floor. Of my own volition I closed the gate until it locked and then crawled onto my mat and promptly fell asleep. Sometime later his buddies must have come along and collected his new and improved remains.

Sometime in the night I awoke to the sound of plashing water and where my hand had splayed off the mat in my sleep it now rested in a puddle. I made the connection to the two bounty hunter dirt bags urinating through the air holes in my cage and yanked my defiled hand out of their piss puddle and sought to wipe it clean on the first dry available surface, my wool blanket. I sprang to my feet and backed away to avoid any further contamination. They were giggling and exulting in a yee-

haw sort of way over their repulsive little prank. After successfully emptying the filthy contents of their bladders into my sleeping quarters they jumped down from the truck bed and stood back a few paces when I sprang forward impervious to splashing across their puddles. Through the air hole I could see them preoccupied with tucking themselves away and buttoning and zipping and manipulating their belt buckles. In a fury I sprang to the opposite side of my cage and hurled myself bodily against the wall. The force of the collision tipped the cage up off its foundation and almost toppled it off the flatbed. In a flash fueled rage I reversed direction and launching myself with rebound momentum threw myself against the wall nearest to my enemies and tipping the cage over the side of the truck the whole kit with me in it dropped through the air and hit the ground on the fly, a beautiful one hop bounce, and me a hamster on a treadmill furiously pumping away. Those two yokels looked up in time to get steamrolled. Flat on their backs as I trundled over the top of them. At the apex they screamed like cats, some might say pussies. After squashing their faces flat I kept on a roll across the compound until my wheel collided with one of the troop carriers and came to a dead halt knocking me off my feet. Most of the inside of my cage was slick with their urine, centrifugal force having played its role, so that part wasn't so cool. Overall, though, I'd have to say it was worth the gambit.

Emanating from Fat Man yelps of utter astonishment and pain radiated through the darkness; from Little Boy groggy execrations loud and groaning, both so loud in combination the whole camp woke up scrambling and mustered for conflict without bothering about the source or cause of the alarm. I took up position standing on the upside down roof near the door and squatted on my hams and wrapping my arms bunched around me I trembled and shook with exultant laughter. I always liked to fancy myself as a logical being but sometimes as in this instance I acted before thinking my actions through. Only afterwards did the possible drastic consequences occur to me. I hoped the troopers would intervene before the bounty hunters gathered their squashed thoughts and laid hands on their weaponry; only then did it register how much I hoped the troopers would prevent those two from murdering me.

I could hear weapons locked and loaded, men's voices shouting, demanding explanations. Flash hustled onto the scene accompanied by two troopers on either side of him. He looked at the empty flat bed and I could follow the trajectory of his thinking as his gaze roamed across the empty space and he reared back when he saw my new location and immediately approached.

"Are you okay?" He asked when he located me. Flash gripped the container and pressed his eyeball to an opening. "What on

Earth happened? You're not hurt, are you?" He asked more out of professional than personal concern.

"I'm fine," I said, rising to a standing position as if to illustrate the point.

"What happened here?" Flash repeated, and I could sense his feeling of pride in me. I didn't hesitate telling him my version of events.

"I woke up to find those two urinating on me in my sleep. So I went a little berserk and rolled my carrier off the truck bed and right over the top of them and crushed them underneath. Then I just sort of kept going until I ended up here."

My matter of fact and wholly unapologetic tone combined with the reckless bravado of the deed itself caused the men to laugh.

"She did what?" I heard a voice ask, wanting in on the joke.

"They peed in her case as a joke and she rolled right over the top of 'em."

As the facts became known the whole company joined in the laughter, and when in a hurt voice a distant voice shouted demanding to know what was so damn funny the laughter grew louder and I smiled in an embarrassed sort of way. I couldn't see much. I heard most everything.

"We've got to get her back on the truck," I heard Flash give the order, the first to regain his sense of the mission's purpose.

"How we supposed to do that with her in it?" Some anonymous trooper demanded. Some people were born to follow, and they were useless without orders.

"We'll have to remove her first," Flash said over his shoulder, turning towards me afterwards.

"Gunny ain't gonna like that. That there is directly against orders."

I don't know why poor grammar seemed like a universal characteristic of troopers. One would have thought their basic training might have included lessons in elocution. I know it sounds stupid, but they might have done something.

They walked off and left me standing their alone. I could hear them several yards away holding a high-level conference on how to get me back into position. Flash returned looking somewhat sheepish about the plan.

"We need to extract you from the cage before we place it back on the flatbed."

"That's not a problem for me," I said, "but it's a filthy mess in here. You're going to have to scrub down this interior with cleanser or something and sterilize everything. I can't be expected to sleep in here with their pee all over everything."

Biological weapon or not I do have feelings. I'm not really an animal. Look at it this way, you need to keep me clean and healthy, for the sake of the mission. I mean, who knows what kind of filthy diseases those two are carrying. You don't want me getting infected with something life threatening before I even get started."

"I'm sure the troopers can take care of the clean-up. That's not a problem. In fact, I'll make sure the cage gets scrubbed. See, the thing is, Nika, they want to cuff you before they take you out."

I thought about it for a moment, about how much I really wanted them to clean my cage, and said, "That's okay with me. I don't mind."

"Wrists and ankles, with a belly chain."

"Fine. Listen, whatever. I'm on your guy's side. I'll do whatever they want. I don't have any kind of quarrel with your troopers. Tell them I'm prepared to cooperate wholeheartedly." Of course they could hear me as I spoke. "But tell them to clean the piss off the floor and walls and ceiling and get me new bedding. I want all new bedding, and wash the outside of my gear as well. Pass the chains in and I'll put them on myself so you all can see I'm secure before you let me out. I'm not going to try to escape in the middle of the night out here in the middle of nowhere. Let's do this thing right and get it taken care of

so we can all get back to sleep. Just keep those two hyenas off me. Make sure they're not armed and keep them at a distance."

Flash went away and the Gunny and a small riot squad returned in full battle gear. I had to help them on the inside as they worked to roll the cage upright. No big deal. I was ordered to turn around and face the inner cargo area and put my hands behind my back and so on. I cooperated fully in my own hogtying. They unlocked the cage door and eased me outside. They could sense I didn't want trouble.

They were a disciplined lot, those troopers. They went in and emptied out the despoiled contents without a wince. To wash out my cage they used a combination of reserve radiator water and foam from a fire extinguisher. They produced a couple of long handled scrub brushes. The blanket they replaced and then sanitized the sleeping pad. They washed and brushed and polished until I had to feel pretty good about the energy they were expending on my behalf. Their thoroughness showed respect because to them I wasn't some animal who would be content to live in a fouled nest. I was a creature of refinement. Well, they probably didn't think that. Some of them were probably more worried I'd blab about raping their little boy friend. Who am I kidding? They were just following orders. I was a dangerous beast and they knew it. Potentially deadly but also possessing a certain delicate sensibility.

As soon as the cleaning was done Gunny asked me if the job had been completed to my satisfaction. I assured him it had and thanked him and his troopers for their kindness and hard work. They smirked and otherwise looked embarrassed as they rolled the empty cage back to the flatbed and a bunch of them worked together to hoist the thing back into place while I shuffle trotted along behind them under armed escort and they loaded my mat and a fresh blanket and my other stuff into my cage again. A minor hitch developed when it came time for me to take up residence because I had to climb up in order to get in there which I couldn't very well do while bound wrists and ankles, and even though palpable good will existed between us Gunny was loath to remove my chains so long as I was still standing outside the confines of my mobile cage. A moment of head hanging and foot scraping ensued among the men. I finally suggested they take hold of me bodily and lift me gently and pass me upwards unto some of their fellows who should take position on the flatbed beforehand. They paid me the final courtesy of double inquiring whether I would indeed stand the handling. I assured them my trust in their professionalism was implicit and complete. I turned and floated backwards like in some corporate trust building exercise falling gently into their waiting embrace and they passed me like a stage diver upwards into the cage with nary a hitch. Once I'd regained my feet the boys

vacated and leapt to the ground. They locked the gate and I backed up to it so they could reach through and unlock my chains. Like a small child I waved at them through the bars, getting eye contact with them, thanking each one personally. The gesture on my part didn't matter. It was no big deal. I was thankful. That's all. For the rest of the night I dreamt the whole company turned my cage into a glory hole. Thank goodness it was only a dream. I don't even like those man things. Thus, my recapitulation was complete.

In the morning the sun popped up like a speckled donut, pink and green and yellow. One of the fellows brought me a cup of kinda coffee, a rare treat indeed. By their proximity I could tell several of the boys had been posted guard, no doubt as a result of the previous night's shenanigans. The call of duty undoubtedly motivated them the most. Under orders they acted to feed and protect me. I could point to subtle little gestures, though, like the coffee -- they didn't have to share, indicating a more personal touch. Lines had been drawn in the Wasteland sand, and I'm sure they didn't much like the carrion bounty hunters, and they understood they were delivering me into harm's way; perhaps that knowledge created an underlying vein of comradery.

I knew the troopers hadn't executed the bounty hunters like I'd hoped. Those dirty buggers remained an integral part of the

mission, though I think the troopers admired my tenacity in the way I'd defended myself and word had spread I'd turned the boy among them into a man. He was convalescing in the sick bay with a smile plastered on his face so in the general view I'd performed a solid for the brotherhood. For such ferocious warriors, cynical about the world besides, they remained superstitious about virgins in combat.

In the morning we filled our bellies full of hardtack and drained our coffee down to the grounds and the boys saddled up their monster machines and we were on the move. Oscar Mike I heard them say. I wish I could have been a member of their merry band. Such was not the case. I was surprised and caught off guard by how quickly we arrived at the insertion point that second day. I mean, I knew we'd arrive inevitably. I just hadn't anticipated it would be so soon. I hadn't had sufficient time to mentally prepare. The unfolding of events seemed rushed somehow.

The caravan pulled off the road onto a wide spot labelled a scenic view in ancient times when people possessed the peace of mind to stand in one place and commune with nature. Who in their right mind would want to stand here now contemplating the wasteland? It would be like staring into the void of your own mortality.

They dropped the cage door and stepped back and I crept forth so as not to make any sudden move that might startle them.

"Thanks for the ride, boys," I said, and some of them touched their fingers to their helmets in token salutes. I was escorted sans restraints to the front of the convoy. I noticed a green boy about a couple of dozen yards off before I realized he was keeping his weapon trained on the bounty hunters. The big fat one had a nasty bruise covering most of his face. I'd done the slightly less fat one even better. The air hole in the cage had imprinted perfect circles on the dude's face, two on his forehead, one that had broken the bridge of his nose, and two more on his fat cheeks, a quincunx to remember me by. I laughed in passing when I saw them. I didn't bother antagonizing those two any further. They had plenty enough reason to kill me already.

Flash waited for me at the head of the column. I'd never seen him in boots and dungarees and a pullover sweater. He looked downright butch. He greeted me in that affable way of his. I was always looking for the killer underneath allowing him to operate as a shot caller. It was the weirdest thing, though. He never revealed a cruel side nor gave any indication he was capable of violence. Everybody around him was capable enough. He remained perfectly nice, a glorified brownnosing teacher's pet.

"I hope you feel rested. I'm really sorry about last night's excitement," he said, a bashful red spreading across his cheekbones.

"I'm okay," I said, letting him off lightly. "Compared to what's ahead, last night will pale into memory."

"That's the spirit," he said, which I wasn't convinced amounted to an appropriate rejoinder, but I let that go, too.

"So what's the plan, Boss?" I asked, smoothing my space suit across the thighs. "Any last-minute instructions?"

Flash never adjusted his black rimmed glasses; I think he was so myopic it was really important for him to keep his prescription goggles perched directly on the bridge of his nose at all times.

"You know all there is to know, Nika. There's a foot path with switchbacks leading to the valley floor. From there you head West, a day's walk, two at the most. You'll probably run into stray zombies before you reach the main horde. Our guess is your reanimated status will make you undetectable and you'll be able to penetrate their numbers without incident.

"And if your hypothesis about my invisibility proves incorrect?"

"Then you'll have to punch your way through the crowd in order to place this device on or near the reactor core. Actually, on the outside of the structure will be fine. See these suction cups on the bottom? Plant it firmly and it will stick to anything. On the top here you break the seal and lift the tab to throw the first switch, do the same on the second

seal and throw the switch. In that instance the clock is running, and you get out of there quick. Get as far away as you can as fast as you can."

"How much time will I have?"

"A couple of hours. It's really just a head start. You'll need to move fast and keep moving. Don't stop or look back for any reason. Especially don't look back when you hear the explosion. There's going to be a bright flash that would be bad for your eyes. Come right back to us here and we'll be waiting to pick you up and take you home where you're going to enjoy a whole new status, believe me. The luxury is going to make your head spin. This mission is important to Mr. Honor, and he is a leader who understands gratitude."

"And what about those two?" I asked, indicating the road kill twins.

"If you're not back in a week, seven days, then I'll have no choice but to set them loose to track you down. So don't go there. It shouldn't take you more than three or four days round trip. Please don't look at me that way, Nika. The Chief of Operations wanted to put an exploding collar around your neck. But I said no way. Honestly, Nika, I stood up for you. I told them there was no need for that. I said Nika Savage is with us all the way on this one. She understands the importance of the mission better than anyone. Granted, you're a rogue, but I

respect that. It's a part of what makes you so formidable. So what I've done is gone out on a limb for you, Nika. I'm putting my trust in you, with the promise of rewards. You need to trust me, too, now, and deliver. Do the things you've been trained to do. It's go time. It's show time. Deliver the bomb and hightail it back here, and life will be so good for both of us. I can't stress that enough."

I folded my arms and narrowed my gaze. "So if you trust me so much, why the bounty hunters?" I didn't give a care, really. In a few minutes he was going to set me free and he'd never see me again, but you never know what information people might give up.

"Honestly? They represent a compromise. Listen Nika," Flash said, stepping closer for the sake of confidentiality, "I've posted a scout to keep watch over you, and the moment you return, if you've been successful, I'm sending those two back first under heavy escort, under arrest for jeopardizing the mission. I give you my word on that. If you complete the mission successfully, then there's no way I'm going to let those two harm you. And I think I can honestly say our friends the troopers feel the same way. You don't realize how much people are willing to like you, Nika, if you just gave them the chance."

"Thanks for the nicety. Anything else?" I didn't mean to be a bitch, but I was bored with the pep talk.

"I'm going to arm you now, Nika. This is where the trust comes in."

"You can trust me," I said, mimicking his favorite word: "Honest."

Flash walked over to a green munition crate positioned on the bare earth and he punched a numerical code into the key pad unlatching the lid popping open with a gasp and automatically rising to display the goods strapped down and stored inside. I approached and took a closer look at the goodies I got to pick from as though they were party favors. I grabbed a thump-thump and a belt full of potatoes, a burp gun and a dozen oversized clips, and a sniper rifle and all the ammunition I could carry in a voluminous bag. I strapped on a utility belt and holstered a pistol on either hip. Firearms really get my juices flowing. The ability to kill somebody at a distance is a turn on. It's a kind of sickness, I suppose, but a supportable one, like sex addiction or alcoholism.

"You're going to carry all that?" Flash asked, obviously surprised that I'd almost emptied the treasure chest. "I thought you would pick just one weapon."

"Is there a problem?" I asked coquettishly, slinging first the burp gun and then the sniper rifle onto my back and carrying the thump-thump as my primary.

"No, nothing wrong, it's just that, to be honest, we made a betting pool on which piece of weaponry you'd choose." He cast his gaze forlornly at the container.

"Which one did you bet on?" I asked, unlocking the thump thump and sliding home a delicious little projectile. No, I'm not being Freudian. It's not the appendage itself I covet. It's the privilege. In my experience a loaded thump thump affords you a lot of respect.

"I thought you'd choose the machine gun," he said, indicating the only weapon I hadn't chosen still packed in the crate.

I reached in and pulled out the machine gun along with four grenades I hadn't noticed. I'd never even seen a grenade in my life let alone throw one. Since they were there for the taking I figured why not.

"I'd say you all loose," I said, stuffing the Flash point and mashers into the volume and shouldering the bag. "See you in four days."

Weighted down with firearms and explosives and eager to separate myself from the weight of expectations foisted on me by that crowd who clearly now felt their fate tied to mine and the

success of the mission I guess I wasn't watching where I was going and tripped and stumbled over a rock. I managed to regain my balance without falling flat on my face. Feeling a fool I really wanted to be gone from their sight and so I plodded to the trail's head and began my decent. The switchbacks were tedious enough, sloping back and forth, easing my body downward toward the valley floor.

"Now that you're away from them, what's the real plan," Hater asked. He'd been strangely quiet for too long so it was good to hear from him again.

"I'm not really sure," I replied. "I'm certainly open to suggestion."

As always I could sense Nadezhda, pensive, expectant, trusting me to come up with the next move even though I was making up the whole goof as I went along.

"I tink no good is running into big zombie bunch."

"No, I know it isn't. This whole mission stinks." I said it like I was an experienced mission goer when in truth this was my first time. It feels really awkward to put it that way, but there you have it. "I don't need to make a decision right this second. We're not even to the valley floor yet. Let's get on the flatland and walk awhile. I'll figure something out."

"You could cut and run," Hater suggested. "Think how long it would take for those two overweight bounty hunters to follow us down this trail."

"We're probably still in sniper rifle range," I said, "and I imagine they must know a road somewhere nearby leading to the valley floor. I can't imagine they'd come after us on foot."

"That buggy of theirs would be a smart prize if we could capture it," Hater mused, and I must admit, the prospect of possessing a motor vehicle thrilled me. I'd become one of those marauders searching for a gallon of gasoline.

"Actually, Hater, driving around in that thing would make us an instant target. People have kidnapped and killed for a lot less. Besides, nobody but Powersby has any fuel."

"Who are you talking to?"

My foot had no sooner landed on level ground than a stranger's voice shocked me out of countenance. The thump-thump slung from my shoulder and my finger flexed in anticipation of planting a potato in the ranger's chest. He held up his hands in a defensive gesture. "Woah woah woah, don't shoot! Relax. Take your finger off the trigger. I didn't mean to startle you. We're on the same team."

"Who are you?" I demanded to know. "Where did you come from?" His jaunty haircut and closely shaved jaw line bespoke a tidy little shaving kit stowed away somewhere. A fit and tan

member of the killer elite who could sew his own buttons. More athletic than learned although possessing above average intelligence. He didn't need to be smarter than I was when he could kill me in a dozen different ways.

The pretty tried to explain. "I arrived as part of the same convoy you did. We're on this mission together."

I forced his hands to remain in the air. "How'd you get down here so fast if you're with the convoy?"

"I repelled down the rock face, yonder." He pointed, and to further corroborate his explanation, he shrugged the nylon rope looped over his shoulder.

Eyeing his desert camouflage fatigues and floppy cloth cap tucked through his belt I figured he was too sharply dressed to be a wastrel. Besides, he had that well fed, chisled, and athletic look about him, and the figure eight heft of rope. I re-slung the thump-thump. He lowered his hands.

"You scared me half to death," I said, glaring at him.

"You've got pre-mission jitters." His patronizing demeanor added a new layer of annoyance.

"I wasn't nervous until you snuck up on me like that."

"Expecting the unexpected. Reaction time. Being aware of your surroundings. It's all a part of it," he said, smiling with pride because he'd memorized some field manual. What a tool.

"What do you want?" I dropped my tone to undercut his inflated sense of self. "Why are you following me?"

"I'm not following you. Think of me more as an escort. As you make your way across the desert floor I'll be monitoring your progress. Dropping in from time to time. No worries. I've got your back. The whole way."

"Well that's good to know," I said, and my face didn't even twitch.

He lowered his hands. "So who were you talking to?" The Sherpa with a nylon rope wanted to know.

"Listen, dude, I can't have you crowding me. One whiff of your albino skin and the zombie horde will come unhinged. I can't have that. You've got to stay well back, or way off to the side; otherwise, you might really jeopardize the mission."

Full of pompous arrogance, Ace of Diamonds said, "You'll never know I'm here."

Full of phony bravery, I said, "Make sure I don't." I have to brag I saw his arrogance harden along the jaw line, and he didn't answer me back. From his reaction I could tell the mission was a priority for him, and I was the mission giving me some kind of operational seniority. But I also realized this clown would be shadowing me, disguised and camouflaged as

cactus. So long as I stayed on course I'd maintain the upper hand. If I broke and ran for it he would shoot me in the back.

"I've got your back," he said, without a hint of irony, and he turned and began to hoof it up the trail heading back to the convoy. At some point he could have to turn around and come back after me. He was the type to climb the switchbacks for the exercise. What a knob.

As I said he started up the trail again for no apparent reason other than killing time before stalking me in earnest, giving a head start, as it were, in a race he was sure to win. I looked back once, long enough to spot him standing amid the buck brush on the trail above the wasteland floor, and he had already gained enough elevation to monitor my progress for miles. He waved his arm in an amiable fashion as if to say bon voyage. My wave back said so long screwy. See you in St. Louis. Our behavior was so workmanlike and collegial. Our exchange of signals indicating we were comrades supporting each other in pursuit of a common goal, and yet if I deviated from the plan in any significant way my erstwhile guardian angel would not hesitate to blow my brains out and afterwards congratulate himself on a beauty of a shot. A real beauty.

For a few moments I tried to put any thought of the Ranger out of my mind and concentrate as much as possible on the here and now, realizing it wouldn't do much good trying to keep tabs

on him. He was there now, and in a little while he would not be there. He would be hiking across the desert at a concomitant angle. He would camouflage himself extravagantly. I was handy with a firearm, proficient anyway. Not an expert like that highly trained killer who fed on adrenaline like it was ambrosia, whose veins flowed with molten lead.

Powersby had done his best to turn me into a savage beast, and in several aspects they'd succeeded. I often felt the urge to kill surging through my blood. My preternatural senses empowered me with certain tactical advantages at close range. If I could sink my claws into an opponent, then it was all over with, finished. Deep down inside, though, my essential nature hadn't changed much. I'm thinking about humanity. I still wanted the best for mankind. I sided with the ordinary denizens in their desire to love and to be loved, to lead a stable and quiet existence, to count the seasons of their lives in equal measure, love their children and watch them grow up. Powersby put a stop to all that a long time ago as far as I was concerned.

Towards nightfall I stumbled across an asphalt path aslant the direction of my final destination. I turned aside and followed it as a solid clue to my whereabouts, and figuring sooner or later the road would curve around and head in the right direction.

I hadn't trooped along for more than an hour when Ranger Rude appeared poised down on one knee atop an outcropping of boulders situated a few yards off the beat-up path to the right. He couldn't just stand by the side of the road like a normal human being and wait for me to approach. How mundane would that have been. No, he had to assume a more picturesque and dynamic posture, the Native Scout reading the landscape atop his chosen perch, his chiseled jaw, god's gift to women, pointed towards the horizon. He was so cock sure of himself. Who did he think he was? So arrogant. So rude. I was feeling myself really attracted to him.

"You've headed off the map, Slim," he said, his rifle shouldered and his pistol snapped snugly inside its holster.

"I kept hoping it would curve around in the direction I was supposed to be going," I answered him, finding the truth a happy expedient for once.

"No, it's not going to do that. It's leading you off in the wrong direction. If you turn around and follow it in the opposite direction, it'll curve around and lead you there."

"That figures," I said, mugging a smile. "Given a half and half chance I chose the wrong direction."

"Didn't they equip you with a direction finder of some sort?" He stood and leapt from his boulder perch and landed with the grace and poise of a very masculine gymnast on the sandy

shoulder of the road. He rolled right up on me and began inspecting me all over as though I were some sort of plebe cadet standing at attention for muster. "What about this here," he said, pulling my hood over my head without asking. I stood there with it on and peered up at him.

"Now what?" I meekly inquired.

Studying the situation, he said, "There oughta be a trigger or a button somewhere. . . to deploy. . ." and he slid his finger inside the hood and pinched at something and a visor hummed down before my eyes and transformed the desert into geometric ordinances and quadrants and numbers denoting time, temperature, direction, coordinates and a bunch of other information I wasn't really sure about and couldn't decipher at first. "Now can you see?"

"I can see a lot of data, but I'm not sure what any of it means."

"Look at your horizon ball. Can you see the letter E? It stands for East. Turn an about face," He instructed, his fingers keeping my shoulders balanced. "Now what does it say?"

"W for West."

"Very good. Find the little red dot. Turn your body until the red dot lines up with the virtual direction bar."

I shuffled my feet. "Got it."

"Your destination lies dead ahead."

"I'll be."

"See what I'm saying?"

I felt around inside the hood and found the pressure point and squeezed. As quickly as it had deployed the radar vision retracted.

"Pretty cool."

"I'm surprised they didn't show you how to work that device."

"They probably did. In fact, now I think about it, I know they did. I remember now. I just forgot. They told me so many things in such a short amount of time I guess I forgot some of it."

"Gotta stick to your training out here," Ranger Rude said, in a cheerful yet professional manner. "Just might save your life."

"I guess my training was more along the lines of a theoretical type. But thanks for showing me the maneuver again. I won't forget it this time." For an awkward moment we stood facing each other, the only human beings for miles around. I didn't know what my relationship to this guy was; I determined to test his limits, without provoking him to out and out kill me. Thus far he'd displayed an amiable willingness to guide my efforts, and yet I felt his supreme arrogance wouldn't let me lead him too far astray. To him this expedition of ours

presented the ultimate career opportunity, and his helpfulness hid the sense it ought to be him spearheading the operation instead of me. He knew everything, and it would be him putting his life on the line, gladly, if it weren't for me. What he had to offer amounted to the totality of his training and his grandiose expertise. He longed to be used, for his life to be placed in jeopardy, to come to my rescue, to go up in me about how to survive in a combat situation, and so I plotted to have my way with him.

"Will you stay with me tonight? Help me build a camp? With your direction it could be something more than just me lying sleepless on the ground."

"The enemy is that way," he replied, gesturing with his index finger and focusing his eyes as though he could already perceive their threat. "And so you want to make camp in a spot where he can't see you as of yet but still supplies maximum security."

Most conspicuous in its absence from his speech on tactics was the answer to my direct request for aid.

We set out together and hiked with scout master Ranger Rude leading the way. Much to my mental discomfort we left the road and trail blazed across the desert while I pined for the lost possibility of gaining time by taking the long way around. With my scanty sense of direction, I quickly found myself wholly

dependent on him as my guide. I only wanted him along to build a fire and stand watch while I slept. I didn't need him to funnel me directly into the jaws of death.

"Let's stop for the night," I said. "Whataya think?"

"If we camp at the base of that berm it will shield us from enemy sight and reduce the avenue of their assault."

He had such an exaggerated way of expressing himself, tinged with unrelenting arrogance, I wondered if he could ever relax enough to make simple conversation in a normal tone of voice. He wasn't brittle in his obstinacy; he would adapt as adverse circumstances demanded, but he'd endured a lot of training wetting his appetite for adrenaline. Driven is the best word I can find to describe him. Driven by such velocity his desire for death and destruction would never be fully sated by cliff diving or lion taming, the only civilian occupations I could imagine matching his level of intensity.

We reached the edge of a boulder field and he began leaping and bounding with a gusto I couldn't match. I scabbled after him the best I could. I didn't want to let him make me look like a total wimp so I tried bounding after him. He seemed to appreciate my effort to keep up since my exertions never threatened to surpass him. We leapt from boulder to boulder, towards the base of what in my judgement had turned out to be a

geological formation larger than a berm jutting through the desert floor.

He planted his feet on the ledge above me and extending his large, powerful hand for me to grip hoisting me up bobbing in place next to him. On each subsequent boulder he repeated this process gesturing for my cooperation several more times until I felt as though we were engaged in a kind of ballet routine. I decided to turn the tables on him to test his reactions. I leapt ahead without waiting for him and turned to extend my helping hand to him and he didn't hesitate to reach for it. When I leapt ahead again he grabbed handfuls of both my cheeks and gave a shove ostensibly to give me a boost, which I didn't really need, but it pushed our relationship onto a new level. Him handling me that way made my tail itch.

We discovered a level area the Ranger judged suitable for our base camp. He made a point of extolling its virtues in terms of the height and angle in relation to the valley floor below and the ridge above. No zombies could possibly follow us up the boulder field we'd just surmounted. They lacked a proper sense of equilibrium for climbing, and they wouldn't drop down on us by surprise from the ridge because the far side rose up in a sheer cliff. I asked Ranger Rick how he knew the far side topography and he revealed he'd been out the week before reconnoitering in preparation for our mission. He also admitted

to hearing no end of whispering about my sizes and shapes, and my prowess.

Pitching a tent with a guy like the Ranger initiated a process you never completely finished. Knowing I could never keep up with his flow of nervous energy I resigned myself to a luxurious cup of tea while reclining next to the circumspect little campfire he'd kindled and losing myself in contemplation of the flames. His perpetual motion in my peripherals was really pushing my cookies by the time he finally sat down on a nearby rock and commenced dismantling and polishing his weaponry, a welcome alternative to his pacing. I shouldn't carp. The man not only pitched camp, built a fire, and cooked dinner, he also constructed a makeshift latrine discretely tucked away behind a bolder downwind.

Our conversation followed an affable enough path until Ranger Dan asked, "So what are you, exactly?" His sly smile belied his underlying indifference to my feelings.

"I'm a monster," I said, not wishing to reward his callous curiosity with anything as delicate as evasion. Only the truth would do to combat the uninitiated.

"A monster?" He retorted, incredulously. "What kind of monster? Were you incubated and bred for this mission? Or put together with spare parts?"

"Spare parts," I said, quitting my contemplation of the fire to watch him fidgeting with his gun parts. "My brain, plus the body of a man I knew, and the soul of love. The combination sent my DNA a little haywire. I'm stronger than I was before, my senses more acute. I'm morphing back into a woman day by day. You have to admit I'm kinda hot, in a scary sort of way. I grew a tail, a nice, atavistic touch. Wanna see?"

"Maybe later," he said, and the sardonic smile this time was cowardice. I'd only been joking. He'd been Mr. Curious just a moment ago. So why did his quick rejection hit me so hard? Not like a sucker punch to the solar plexus. Not that hard. But a shot to the guts. Hard enough.

"You received a certain amount of training, too, right?"

"I actually had a life before this mission business was thrust upon me," I said, masking my disappointment. "Then the Dark Matter Corporation in all of its wisdom resurrected me for this job. So yeah, I went through rigorous training, the full montage."

The sun staid fixed in one position boiling and churning fire, heat, and light. The Earth, meanwhile, rotated on its axis until the side of the planet where we stood faced off into deep space and we were covered in shadows. The other suns that had been there all along were now much easier to see without the competing glare of our own sun.

I unzipped my sleeping bag and lay down on it without crawling inside yet since the evening felt cool and refreshing. The suit automatically adjusted the temperature according to my body heat, meaning I did perspire, and so there was no good reason really for removing it other than after wearing it all day I felt sweated out and stifled. Without giving Ranger Randolph the impression I might be issuing a come-all-ye-faithful I slipped out of it and setting it aside laying back down in my skivvies and the cool night felt delicious against my bare limbs. I wanted to lie on my side and face away from the flames and warm my tail for as long as the embers smoldered. Ranger Rude kind of killed it though when he rejected my offer to view my special appendage and I should have maintained a thicker skin, especially now I was nearing the end of my teens, I nevertheless remained facing the fire and hid my tail from sight.

I had neither expected to fall asleep so quickly nor to sleep so soundly the whole night through. When I opened my eyes more the Earth had rotated into the Sun's direct beams and I know I must have rolled about restlessly as people do and it must have been just a coincidence I woke up in the exact same posture wherein I had left off consciousness. In the pit of my stomach I immediately felt a pang of fear concerning the danger

expected and foreseeable but unavoidable. I lay there staring at the cold and lifeless ashes.

Ranger Rick knelt on a boulder apparently on guard duty surveying the landscape. I found it unlikely he'd maintained that posture the whole night through. He wasn't such a bad guy, I guess. Not a total loser. Kind of posy, a little too into himself.

"Have you been crouching there all night?" I didn't bother to stir or even raise my head.

"I don't need much sleep. I can survive on practically none if I had to."

Hearing him say that I suddenly trusted him a lot less. What kind of adult doesn't crave sleep? Besides, he was too handsome to suffer from insomnia. At the very least sleep deprivation creates purple skin bags beneath the eyes, deep rings and sallow, emaciated cheeks. Bright eyed Ranger Rudolpho looked clear eyed and freshly shaved so he either had some sort of mutant metabolism or he was a braggart, a liar. At the very least he was exaggerating.

I slipped into my gear and stood up as I zipped up, getting tail situated just right. At first glance the desert appeared normal, same as it always had, but in the next instant the landscape underwent a deformation. As I blinked and rubbed the sleepies from my eyes the valley floor revealed a walled city

surrounding a central structure dome not unlike a mosque. I recognized it as the target of my mission. Populating the otherwise barren landscape just outside the city's protective wall a mob milled about in the early morning air. I joined Ranger Danger on his lookout perch and he handed me a pair of field glasses so I could get a closer look.

I lowered the glasses and said, "Those aren't zombies. They're ghouls."

"What's the difference?"

At first I was struck by the possibility he might not know the difference. Then I realized he was joking. With macho bravado. He wasn't asking for a point of clarification. He was saying, in effect, 'who cares?'. The subtext being he would just as readily shoot one as the other. The tone of that remark disappointed me, and not just because it was nonresponsive and unfunny. Those creatures before us had been human beings once. Poisoned beyond redemption by nuclear spill, nobody was going to step forward to help them. Who was going to pay for that?

I handed his binoculars back to him. "What would you suggest I do? I mean, if you were me, what would you do?"

He peered into the tubes once again. "If this was my mission, I would have already gone in, at night, and stealthed my way over that perimeter wall."

"Do you think I should wait here until night rises again?" I asked, hoping for a reprieve from duty.

"Naw, this operation is a piece of cake. We'll get you in and out with nobody the wiser. Blast your way in. With you down there and me up here supplying cover fire it'll be no problem. A walk in the park."

My line of site followed the trajectory of his binoculars, and I was not encouraged by what I saw. A ghoul is a vicious creature whose mind has been corrupted beyond communication. Just because I felt sorry for them didn't mean I was going to let them kill me.

"The plan has been for me to fake my way past a zombie hoard by relying on my own somewhat undead status to mingle and fit in. Now it's apples and oranges. Rotten oranges."

Ranger Danger hopped down from his boulder and I hopped down and followed after him like a faithful servant.

"As you yourself said a minute ago, those aren't zombies down there. They're ghouls, and they're not going to mistake you for one of them."

"You don't think so?" I grimaced to have my own estimation of the situation validated.

"No way. You're way too pretty, in a scary sort of way, and you smell nice."

"Do you think zombies would have mistaken me for one of their own?"

He crossed his arms and leaned his shoulder against the escarpment and crossed his legs in the worst impression of nonchalance I'd ever seen and answered my question by posing a few of his own.

"Say, what's your exact status, anyway? You some kind of biological weapon or something?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure what I am anymore. I've been slapped together with spare parts, causing certain unexpected mutations."

"That where the tail came from?"

"Flash offered to have it surgically removed, but I grew accustomed to it really quickly."

"Flash who? Flash, your doctor? Doctor Flash?" For some reason those permutations seemed to amuse him. His lame sense of humor was beginning to annoy me.

"No, he wasn't one of the surgeons. He's some guy from Corporate. The man overseeing this mission."

"You mean the little preppy guy with glasses?"

"Yeah, that's him."

I wouldn't go so far as to say Ranger Rick was revealing signs of jealousy. I think the alpha male in him was

instinctively marking the ground around me. I went back to the cliff's edge and Danger joined me in surveying the scene.

I pointed. "Maybe I should start out over there and follow the road in the hopes they don't see me and head straight for the front gate." I watched him consider my plan before dismissing it.

"A certain wisdom says to always attack the front gate, and that makes sense, if you think about it, it is the way in, but that's also the reason why it's built up and fortified the way it is. Another wisdom says look for the weakest part of the wall. Maybe it's the gate. Maybe it's not. In this case, it ain't."

"Where is it, then? The weakest spot?"

"There," he said, nodding his head toward a pile of rocks. "See what they did there? They got lazy building their wall and incorporated that pile of rocks as a section of their defenses. It may have saved them a few hours on a hot day, but it was a stupid move."

I saw what he was saying but my heart clutched because in order to reach that part of the wall I'd have to plow through the crowd down there where the ghouls were thickest.

"You don't think they'll follow me up that?"

Not with me blasting away at 'em from up here they won't, and besides, if they haven't climbed it by now chances are they

can't, or won't, for whatever reason. If they try, I got your back. No worries." Ranger Danger produced his sniper rifle. He tweaked the aspect and looking through the scope and repeated under his breath, "No worries at all."

Maybe not for you, *Pal*, I thought to myself. Outloud I said, "Can I ask you a question?"

"You already have."

I rolled my eyes at him. "No, really. Will you be honest with me about something if I ask you a direct question?"

"Shoot," he said, gripping the stock of his sniper rifle and pointing the muzzle off to one side.

"Do you care whether or not I live through this?"

"Absolutely," he said, without hesitation.

"You do?" I asked, somewhat surprised by his sudden adamancy.

"Sure I do. Listen, if you die before reaching the wall, that's mission failure, and failure is not an option, not on any mission I'm involved with, including this one."

"So you'll take a kind of professional pride in keeping me alive."

He hemmed and hawed, pulled at his lips, reluctant to discuss deeper motivations. "Listen, you go down there, and you show those ghouls who's boss. Open with your thump thump and lay down a barrage, blaze a path of destruction and then follow

through with your burp gun. Anything gets in your way slice through it. Use the technology you have at your disposal. You are loaded with weapons of mass destruction. You run and you keep on running and you don't slow down and you don't look back. Get to the wall and throw yourself over. Come through the main gate on your way out, not your way in. Anything gets too close, I'll take care of it. Once you're inside, you'll be more on your own. My line of sight will be blocked. At that point stealth might be better than direct confrontation. Climb the rock and vault the wall and you're in. No problem. Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless the zombies you were expecting are inside the wall waiting for you. That would make a certain sense. No one comes in or out anymore. What do zombies care about free trade? You know what I mean. Maybe that wall isn't walling the ghouls out. Maybe it's more fencing a zombie population in."

"In your professional estimation, is this situation what you would call a suicide mission?"

"Naw, I'd say your chances of success are moderate. Look, I've been on a lot crazier missions than this one, believe me. Once you're over the wall I'll redeploy to the other side of that valley nearer to the road, and on the way out you run for your life, and I'll pick off whatever might come after you. I'll literally be covering your tail."

"You're a jerk."

"Once we join up we'll engage in a tactical redeployment together."

"What could go wrong?"

"You don't want to say things like that before a mission like this. Not even in joking."

Oh sure, you can make lame ass jokes all morning, but I can't make even one, I thought. "Let's get this over with," I said aloud.

"Wait, here's a little something for good luck," he said, and holding my bicep to balance me he smacked me on the mouth.

"Yeah, that was special," I said, wrenching my arm free and turning away from him I dragged my sleeve across my lips.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing," Hater demanded, as I went to find my gear and saddle up.

"Do I know what I'm doing?" I snapped. "Does it look like I know what I'm doing?"

"I tink you say word not very ladylike," Nadezhda admonished.

Nonplussed, I appealed to Hater, "What did I say?"

"You referred to a certain part of his anatomy as being lame."

"Oh come on you two; that wasn't even aloud. That doesn't count."

I was strapping on the voluminous bag when a clarion bird call pierced my hearing. I looked up and sharpshooter guy pressed his fingers to his lips to shush me.

Are you sure you can trust that guy? Hater whispered.

I don't have much of a choice, do I? I replied. I thought to have made my escape my now. I thought I'd just have to kill those two furball bounty hunters. That dude is a different animal. I'm not sure I can take him. I'm not sure I want to try, for some reason."

I tink you forget a problem.

I can't stop for punishment right now, Sweetie. If we come out of this alive I'll be sure to put a quarter in the swear jar.

Oh, I tink we make dat fat bottom a little redder dan dat!

Okay fine. Whatever you want, but for right now let's put our heads together and focus and concentrate on getting through this experience alive.

Down and down over the boulders I clambered, my feet crunching eventually on the hardpan desert floor covered in soft grained sand. Through my mind flashed an image of the dog kennels back at base camp, a room full of cages with canines housed inside I was surprised to learn the troopers were not raising for the meat. They had in fact made friends with those creatures and trained them through long arduous hours to do

their master's bidding while feeding them a special diet and brushing their fur and even manually satisfying their reproductive urges not surprisingly eliciting from the dogs a loyalty remarkable in its ferocity. Each animal worked in tandem with its own man exclusively forging the bond of loyalty even more. They were buddies and worked together on crowd control, deportation duty, and special ops in formidable fashion. Why the memory of these creatures should recur to me so pungently, their cold and wet noses, hot overheated tongues panting and lolling and dripping acrid saliva, stench of wet fur, puzzled me as I trudged towards the bur of land where lay coiled sure turmoil and mortal danger. Nobody had friggged my loyalty. My loyalty could have used some proper manual manipulation. Without it, my attitude was more like a Persian slave whipped into battle against the democratic Greeks. Philosophers agree that an army of freemen cannot be defeated on the field of battle, and if such an army does suffer defeat, then the fault resides not within the soldiers themselves but with the quality of their democracy.

Hatred of the enemy was rarely if ever the actual cause of hostility between two nations. The falderal of patriotism had nothing to do with anything. One would have to dig down much deeper than that, well past fear and anger, beyond ignorance and want, delve farther even than desire, before finally arriving at

the ultimate motivation for war, greed. Powersby hadn't risen to the top of the Dark Matter Corporation through a love of altruism. He wasn't looking to wipe out zombies for the good of the people. There had to be some money in this operation for him somehow. With a dung heap this high there had to be a pony stabled nearby somewhere. I resolved to lay bare the profit motive, and if possible cut myself in on some of the action, because underneath these fancy humanist trappings, my favorite charity still happened to be me. If only I could prevent the zombie apocalypse from stripping the flesh off my bones. Keep my teeth where they were presently attached along my jaw line. Eyeballs firmly connected to the visual cortex inside my skull. Those expedients made up my more immediate battle plan.

Before rounding the spur I carefully considered my weapons options and decided on a pistol in one hand and a truncheon in the other, the most low key options in the arsenal I'd been lugging around the desert. I was already making choices the Powers That Be would undoubtedly characterize as counter-intuitive.

Stepping into open view of those creatures felt like the nightmare where you step naked onto a stage opening night with a thousand eyes watching and judging your every move only to realize you don't know your lines and have no idea what to do next.

In the bright glare of morning sun I stood with the ridge now behind me, in front of me the outer barrier wall and my ultimate target the nuclear dome, and in between an open cauldron of ghouls milling about in a stupor. Oh my stars, the stench! Collectively they emanated an odor riper than a blue port-a-potty abandoned near a hot desert rest stop in July. I'd never seen a ghoul up close and I hope to never again. For in spite of their well-earned reputation for mayhem, those first few moments of my first encounter with them while I was free to observe them and take note of their various lineaments I could not help but be struck with horror at their appearance. Not one of them wore shoes and socks, those combined comforts having long ago rotted away, exposing their feet to every sharp abuse in Nature's arsenal. Their toenails were a fright, grown long as talons through neglect and packed to the cuticles with black filth. Either in that state or torn away and missing completely and raw. Infection had found a home in those black and red feet as evidenced by a yellow puss oozing and congealing. They were speckled like a swollen diabetic with black tentacles of gangrene spreading upward disappearing beneath the tattered remnants of their trousers. From the egregious state of their scraps of remaining clothing it became obvious to me they no longer possessed the mental wherewithal for attending to their bodily functions, the cloth of their clothing stained repeatedly

by urine and excrement so many times the cloth had become imbrued with fetid fecal matter. Their shirts, where shirts remained, were likewise soaked to tatters and rotted by salty sweat and their rib cages pressed against skin stretched thin and burned and peeled and burned again by the murderous sun and through malnutrition grey and sallow. None of them retained any body hair, including their scalps, whatever industrial strength toxin they encountered having depilated them permanently, including brows and lashes. The final horrors tearing at my humanity and sickening my human heart recoiled at the depredations melting their faces. Manmade poisons had eaten away the softest tissue, ears, noses, lips gone, melted away, and rotted teeth and bone exposed, as though indifference had splashed each face with acid burning the flesh away and causing what remained to slip down and then harden and congeal into new and abnormal rivulets and clumps. My horror turned to terror when I recognized the sullen fury boiling in those bloodshot eyes, a fury focused on me.

In warning I brandished my baton, an admonition for those poor blighted souls to keep their distance. Their reaction to my vague threat came as a surprise. Instead of either advancing or retreating they became mesmerized by the pendulum like swings, reminiscent of the crowd at a tennis match, or a dog engaged in a game of fetch the stick with its master. I tested their

fixation by pausing at the completion of each arc, and sure enough their gazes remained fix. On a whim I reared back, making sure my audience stayed with me, and flung the truncheon as far as I could off to the right. Immediately the front row aficionados limped and scuffled away in pursuit of the flung object, pushing and shoving, grunting and screeching in a most inhuman contest to lay claws upon the shiny prize. With this one simple move I dispersed about half the crowd. Ghouls move and act with a lemming like instinct, born followers. My initial experiment in crowd control having met with success, I endeavored to replicate my findings by gripping the pistol by the barrel and waving it around garnering the attention of the next layer of ghouls who after I flung it also set off in hot pursuit, albeit not in the same number as previously owing no doubt to the smaller appearance of the object. In the moment I reflected upon my other hardware available and chose the Thump Thump as the next most viable candidate. Brandishing the weapon by the business end I was careful to swing back and forth in an exaggerated manner designed to attract and mesmerize a majority of my audience before heaving the dastardly device with the maximum force I could muster. Away those filthy creatures scurried in hot pursuit of the airborne object. It clipped a ghoulish creature who had just been standing there staring numbly in front of him and caused an outburst of angry squalling as the others

shoved past him and around him unheeded of his consternation. I didn't mean to hit one in the head. Obviously I was doing my best to avoid any violence. In like manner I chucked the sniper rifle and machine gun. By the time I had rid myself of that deadly arsenal most of the unholy crowd now faced away from me. With only a small handful of chimerical adversaries milling about between the city and me. I did as I have always done when navigating a random and chaotic landscape. I employed my intuition and imagination. I ran. Sprinted, as fast as I could gallop down field headed for the goal line. At times I locked my elbow and straight armed my attacker and rotated my hips in a statuesque pose. In the next instant reversing field and thereby avoiding trouble altogether. In my heroic dash occurred to me the long-term danger of distributing so many weapons to such a disreputable rabble without so much as a background check. With a midstride glance I discerned the beasts had gathered round the sacred ikons, inspecting them where they lay on the ground without picking them up, satisfied, evidently, to pay homage by fondling themselves and drooling.

As in most political associations there is always that one member, that single zealot, who never recognizes it's time to give it a rest. As I broke into the clear with only the rock outcropping portion of the wall in front of me I heard his bare feet thumping the desert sand behind me and the hysterical

rasping of his foul and polluted breath. In a strange tableaux moment I noticed a herd of female ghouls far off to the right in my peripheral vision who were facing the wall with their backs turned against their male counterparts. I couldn't help but feel for them in their defensive posture, knowing how in a culture where violence begets violence they were certain to be the first victims.

Pe-tak!

By that cracking sound I knew the Ranger had felled my pursuer. I leapt onto the first boulder and clambered up the rest of the pile where at the zenith I turned in air to catch a glimpse of more ghouls staggering after me before I plummeted out of sight along the seer rock face on the other side. The snapshot my mind resolved into an image of a few ghouls trying unsuccessfully to surmount the first rock at the bottom edge of the pile. The Ranger's sniper rifle spoke a few more times in rapid succession, relieving my apprehension about any further danger origination from that quarter.

I looked around to see where I had landed and found myself standing between two walls on a ribbon of green grass. Allow me to assure you, I was astonished as you must be at the shameful wasted of water such an expanse of lawn signified. What kind of zombies could these be, I wondered, who took an interest in cultivating such a cosmetic effect.

Beyond the next wall confronting me I could see windows with actual glass intact adorning the top floor of a tile roofed building. I considered the view to the right and saw nothing beyond where the wall curved and the grassy lane disappeared. Knowing the main gate lay to the left I turned in that direction as more promising.

I had strode for a fair distance when I came upon a fair slight creature preoccupied among a patch of dandelions. She sported a profusion of golden tresses wound about by a diadem of her own making. Daisy chains also girdled her waste and chained her wrists and ankles, confusing my judgement as to whether this slender sprite were queen or concubine of Nature. Sensing my approach, she looked up and blasted a peacock's shriek. I must have appeared crestfallen as my feelings struggled not to be hurt. Quickly, though, as this changeling froze in terror and pointed her quacking finger I realized the source of her terror was indicating the area behind my back.

I spun round to behold two of those malignant creatures, who had managed to scale the wall and had been quietly stalking me now burst into a sprint. A third apparition tumbled over the wall, falling in an awkward manner and snapping his ankle at a grotesque angle leaving no doubt it suffered a clean break. The creature crabbed about on the grass before lying still save for the heaving and swelling of his breathing. Meanwhile the

previous pair continued their rapid advance, inchoate rage burning in their bloodshot eyes.

I turned and ran, scooping the child up and breaking her flowered finery, revealing her to be a human child not more than dozen years old. As I ran with the Queen of the May cradled in my arms Hater demanded to know how I intended to extricate myself from this predicament. What was my action plan! Oblivious of the danger we were in Nadezhda crooned over the little beauty I carried in my arms. Ignoring Nastya and responding to Hater in a panic I cried out, "How the hell should I know!" Immediately I cringed at my own indiscretion.

Nastya said, "You know you carry innocent little child in you arms. I tink you not want to be bad influence, Miss Potty Mouth."

Hater added, "She's obviously an impressionable young mind, Nika. You know what they say: garbage in garbage out. You really should set a better example."

"You two always gang up on me at the most inopportune moments. I can never say I'm sorry enough to please either one of you!"

"Oh you poor ting, Sasha the Savage. You no argue potty mouth a good ting, na?"

"She's right, you know," Hater admonished. "Your use of vulgar language really is indefensible."

"Okay! Okay! I give up! I give up!"

"She's giving up!"

"Hit with the net. Bag 'em both."

A cargo net enveloped me like a web tripping my feet out from under me. Just when I'd about face planted my little charge and I were hoisted free of the ground by the thick, coarse fiber. Another heave ho and we were equal with the top of the inner wall. A ghoul reached up his filthy claws to rip and tear until some sort of militia man fired his weapon and the filthy beast's head exploded.

"Nice shot."

"Beauty."

I heard these words spoken as the wooden crane arm from which we dangled swiveled us dizzily over the wall and away from danger. Another shot rang out but I was too buttressed by the cargo net and tossed in midair to see the action.

We were lowered slowly and gently to the ground. I could hear an elder sentry coaching his young recruit to take his time, aim for the head, squeeze the trigger, one shot.

I thought their one shot policy might have stemmed from their sense of mercy in putting the poor wretched creature out of his misery, but when the shot was fired the ebullience and high-fives revealed a different aesthetic.

A flurry of hands created a gap in the netting wherein a woman's fair countenance appeared bearing the very likeness of the concerned mother portrayed in the ivory of a cameo brooch. She reached out to grab the child from my embrace. Having no claim but the desire to preserve her safety, I let loose the child. I'd just saved her from certain death, after all. I was the hero, was I not? Anger, ferocity, indignation, relief, puzzlement, gratitude: these various emotions and more shaped and reshaped the mother's emotions as she struggled to comprehend who or what I might be and why I had rescued the child rather than devouring her whose blonde confusion peered over a shoulder to wave bye-bye. I responded in kind.

"Never again," I could hear the mother repeating with bitter self-recrimination.

"I just wanted to pick the daisies," I could hear the child protesting, feebly.

My farewell moment with the little girl the members of the wall patrol interrupted, not helping me to my feet so much as lifting me bodily and demanding I stand tall before the man as they trained their weapons on me.

"Who the hell are you, and what d'you think you're doing coming over the wall like a hunk o' fire?" I really despise good old boys.

"Who the hell are you? (oh hush. We'll settle it later). I wasn't expecting to find people here."

"Who were you expecting," a younger barbarian inquired, almost sweetly. Guys are so gross.

"I was told this city was filled with zombies." Polite laughter. I hate ordinary people so much. "I come from the Wasteland. The Powers That Be sent me to destroy the zombie population inhabiting this city. I wasn't expecting a herd of ghouls. I did my best to pass through them without creating a stampede, but a few of them must have followed me over the wall. I ran across the little girl on accident. I couldn't have very well left her behind for those disgusting creatures to put their claws on."

The bandy-legged little man danced a jig in the excitement my speech had caused. He tried to size me up from every angle without drawing any real insight.

"You're not from around here. There ain't no zombies inside these walls, else we'd know about it. You've been lied to." He turned to his companion. "You boys take this shameless hussy to the Beadle and have him lock her up for safe keeping until such time as the Magistrate can be apprised of these developments."

As his crew each grabbed a handful to escort me along, in parting I said, "Hussy, Sir? I protest, in the strongest terms."

"We'll just see about that," the ancient doorkeeper intoned, getting in the last word before his minions whisked me away.

I surrendered without a fight and followed the gendarmerie with such perfect docility after a dozen yards more they sensed my willingness to cooperate and though they continued to surround me they relinquished their ungentle grasps guiding me instead by the power of their magnetism in tandem with my own intuition as to which direction our next steps would take us.

We descended onto a city lane familiar as a recurring nightmare where the pressure of the cobblestones pressed against my arches at odd angles causing them to ache. I felt as though I knew this place, yet everything seemed distorted, the buildings stretched taller and thinner, gaunt and stooping like some disreputable old poet smoking a cigarette and wearing a raincoat on a street corner under a lamp post. Five floors of shuttered windows. How was such architecture possible? Each ascending layer overbearing the one below it. The street twisted and turned with an imbecilic lack of logic or design, or so it seemed until I realized the layout of the street followed the contours of the underlying natural terrain.

My armed escorts and I emerged from that maze when the only lurking danger was how I would ever be able to find my way back again without help and with the way the situation was shaping up

I doubted whether I should ever return this way again. The old architecture cowered in the shadows of the new. The proud steel must have risen stern and full of glass decades after the first structures, and yet like everything in the wasteland they too suffered from decay. The local denizens had obviously worked hard to keep clean those parts of the outer surface they could easily reach with their brooms and mops while the cleaning crews were standing at ground level because above that hot wind had encrusted the skyscraper with a thick accumulation of filth, like a peasant standing in a wash tub. My guess was that at some time in the distant past people could see out their windows now caked over with crud. I asked Hater why they couldn't keep the windows clean any longer like they had in the olden days. He said, they lost the technology but didn't elaborate. He said he'd never seen so many intact windows in one building before in his whole life and I had to agree.

We arrived at a populated area where happy city dwellers went about their business. The abundance of park like foliage immediately gave away the presence there of a fresh water wellspring. I'd gotten close to as many well springs as I had fingers on one hand; this place added a thumb to the total count.

The geodesic dome appeared again off in the distance to my left although closer now as we entered a cluster of monuments.

The proximity of the nuclear power plant to the city center struck me as odd each time we crossed an intersection and the enormous cooling dome loomed into view. On the other hand it's central location made a certain amount of sense. Energy machines required a lot of water, and the water was near the city center. Hater brought that up. He wondered about a water supply fulsome enough to keep the rods cool. I suggested to him we would have to compare notes later concerning the many unexpected discrepancies we'd encountered thus far. I rather looked forward to the quiet confines of a detention cell in a civilized city like this one where I would be free to think my own thoughts and figure out for myself the difference between a zombie and these gentle humanoids calling themselves liberals. Why, they hadn't even bothered to search me yet or the volume for weapons or explosives. In a way I began to feel sorry for these human beings because they were far too trusting. I thought about the thermos detonator in my bag and how close I was to the target, and I visualized performing the destructive act as I'd been trained to perform, following through on the mission. Every step I took without acting led me away from the possibility of that fulfillment, and besides, the intel they'd provided to me had proved totally shoddy so far, and as we plodded up the steps of a mundane government building I resolved to postpone taking

radical action until I had a chance to reassess the entire situation.

The building we'd entered served as the local gendarmerie. Lovely lads, really. They confiscated my property, including the voluminous bag, and patted me down in gentle fashion. They wanted to know where my weapons were hidden. By way of reply I recounted to them the particulars of my morning incursion, leaving them nonplussed with my aggressive pacifism and searching each other's bemused faces, at a loss how best to proceed with their interrogation.

"The sentries reported shots fired," the physically largest among them ventured, not looking at me, which I considered odd, since you'd assume he'd want to observe my facial features while I replied in order to watch for any ticks or tells. Instead I watched him, square blonde head, crew cut, as he fiddled with my bag.

"You'll want to be careful opening that," I said. "If you pop it open the wrong way it'll crush us all. There's not enough room in here to bust it wide open." My estimation of this foot soldier increased after he heeded my warning immediately and stopped his fingers from looking for a way to pop the volume open and set it down carefully on the table. A government man in the same situation would have slapped me for my insolence in presuming to tell him what to do and meddled with my kit until

it exploded. If you knew what you were doing it opened easy as can be, but if you drove your fingers in and started blindly yanking and tearing you'd be sorry.

Before the search and seizure became too personal they handed me over to a female patroller who was surprisingly good looking for a soldier. She had white hair with tints of gold she wore pulled back and fixed out of her face. Her jaw line was hard and angular and her blue eyes were peaceful and dreamy, no anger in their gaze, unusual for law enforcement. She took me by the elbow and gently but firmly guided me out of the room and down a worn corridor to the shower room.

I forget what the statistics say about the arrest rate among women during the ancient Empire, the time anyone kept reliable scientific data. I wanna say it was something like more than half underwent repeated arrest, mostly for search and seizure in abortion cases. As we all know the womb is the number one crime scene. Number two is the Senate, but I'll pass over that and go on to say the vast majority of women will undergo a medically unnecessary invasive procedure at least once in their lifetime. I don't know how many times I'd been told what a low life creature I am as a woman so it didn't come as a big surprise to find myself yet again subjected to a supervised delousing.

"Prepare to be shocked," I said as nicely as possible to my little police woman friend. Her hand propped on the butt of her firearm slung from her utility belt. "I didn't mean it like that. My body isn't normal. Just saying."

Her demeanor didn't relax any so I proceeded to undress. She was a brave little soldier until my tale felt the cool breeze of freedom and whipped about in a salacious manner. I swear sometimes that thing operated with a mind of its own. When my saucy corporal saw it peaking at her from between my thighs like a bashful child her eyes opened wide and her lips grew jagged. Then my tail did something I didn't know it could do: it lay perfectly flat in a protective posture across my Brown Beatty and Nadezhda's transplanted hole-in-one curling along my thigh and tucking its heart shaped crown in the crook of my knee.

"What are you?" Corporal Punishment demanded, kind of hurting my feelings. I wrapped my arms around my waste.

"I'm a monster," I replied. "I'm what's left of three fairly decent people destroyed by the Power That Be."

"What is that? Is that a tail?"

"Yes, that's exactly what it is. It's a mutation. But I'm not a mutant. I'm more like a medical experiment who suffers from unforeseeable results."

Corpus Delectae then did an unexpected thing. She fell into a reverie. Earlier in my life, if I'd found myself naked in a shower area with a beautiful gendarme, either I would have been put upon sexually or I would have precipitated the occasion myself. What I hadn't been prepared for in this instance was the obvious revulsion the pretty corporal felt in my presence. I was never entirely certain about Hater's age let alone my own. Nadezhda had been the youngest. We'd all been young. What did she find so objectionable? My curves had returned. Granted there were scars running like zippers here and there, but nothing to gasp at. I looked like a very sexy cadaver, with a tail, and a metal plate in my skull. My hair was good, thick, matted, dreadlocks. They were supposed to look that way, and for the most part they covered the copper plate sealing the hole Hater had made when he blew his stack. I never did discover the identity of the cause of the ivory whites, a tad too perfect producing a grin not to be ignored. Maybe my arms retained the male musculature, thinner though. My figure had shifted into hour glass mode. Thighs and calves tone in a manner surprising at first. I'd been walking a lot, and training, then the salacious tale. At this point I should probably halt my inventory lest some astute feminist personage accuse me of some egregious crime against the sisterhood.

I felt awkward having to prod the poor dear to her job properly.

"Am I supposed to take a shower? Or do you want to do a cavity search?"

"You're not concealing anything, are you?" She asked in a plaintive way hoping for an answer in the negative. I shook my head no and her demeanor hardened and I felt relieved she was finding her core again because while I stood there naked one of us ought to have been in charge and I really didn't want it to be me. For a moment I daydreamed about attacking her and twisting her pretty head off her pretty neck. A thrill of anger shivered through me, and then it passed. I was inventing problems that for the most part didn't exist.

Perhaps someday I'll learn to think on my feet. Events had transpired so quickly I hadn't sufficient time to process the extent to which nothing confronting me in any way resembled what the Powers That Be had conditioned me to expect. Even after their extensive brainwashing and physical training my heart had never been committed to the mission. The entire time my mind had been restlessly searching for an escape route, right up to the jumping off point. In the mad dash to the barrier the rush of adrenaline effaced my better judgement. Now that my situation had quieted down I realized I needed some time to digest these recent developments, starting with blondie here, and a nice hot

shower. She was scrumptious, and I pined for her to join me, but I was faced by an ugly reality; she found me physically repulsive. A first for me in my life. I asked about the duration of my water ration. My question knocked her out of her reverie and she immediately returned to duty.

"We don't ration water here. It bubbles out of the ground. Beyond our ability to control. So we take the attitude, might as well drink it while it lasts."

She sauntered over to a nearby wall and using her palm slammed the GO button, drenching me in a sudden downpour and wrenching from me a gasp. The water ran cold, and I was startled at the lack of a ready-set-go warning. Oh but the water. The water, it warmed up quickly and tasted and smelled so pure my peevish inclination soon dissolved and I luxuriated as I always did in the fortune inside the misfortune inside a harem or a jail, the slave's dilemma, the prisoners ration. You reach a point where survival becomes day to day, then minute by minute. After you lose all hope you're free to do whatever you need to in order to keep breathing. The showers were hot. The food offered nourishment. I acquiesced.

Officer Slambang approached with a box tattered and frayed, one I feared might be filled with some kind of chemical delousing agent but instead turned out to be full of powdered soap she pelted me with, liberally. Mixed with water it emitted

a marvelous fragrance in imitation of some defunct wildflower and what was best the flakes turned oily and slippery. Pretty high grade stuff for the drunk tank. In her tight little uniform Officer Slambang studied me in a curious, mostly professional manner. She tracked my body movements. I could see it in her eyes. I lowered my eyelids to half-mast as I worked the cleansing oil into my dreadlocks. On a whim I shot a look at my captor and caught her mesmerized by my redoubtable body. Busted. The best parts, the female bits, were superimposed on a man's physique, the tail and the claws and the teeth were added extras, like a moist cherry on chocolate ice cream cake slathered in white frosting. If you don't dig me, I thought smiling with deep inner satisfaction, eat me.

I applied, rinsed, and repeated as many times as I dared, shy of trespassing on the fine grace of hospitality.

"That's enough," Fancy Pants said, finally. Water in that jail poured forth in abundance. Patience they rationed. I couldn't blame them if they felt defensive. I'd penetrated their perimeter and brought in with me several ghouls hot on my tail.

Missy tossed me a towel and I dragged it across the odd angles of my person.

"Throw it in the hamper," my jailor indicated when I tried to press the damp cloth into her hands.

She led me into a side room, windowless and spare, square on four sides round, the walls supporting gym lockers and plastic benches anchored to the floor. We passed through the dressing room into an equipment room where piles of orange jump suits waited for drunks, thieves, violent types, and deviants. Being none of those I suggested a red pair for me, and no sooner having said it, I regretted the request.

"They're still evaluating your belongings. Here, go ahead and wear the red, if you fancy that color. I ought to warn you, though, we reserve that kit for the worst offenders only. Walk around here in those and people will assume you're the worst type."

"Then maybe I shouldn't wear them after all. What about the white pairs?"

"Trustees only. Fraid I can't let you loose in one of them. That's a privilege has to be earned."

"Blue pair?"

"Corporate crime."

"Bet they don't get much use."

"None at all."

"I don't want them anyway. I haven't robbed widows and orphans." Only one color remained before we were back to murderous red. "How about green?"

"Section 8," she said, wrinkling her nose. "You don't want that."

"Oh no! I do! I do! Green is perfect for me. Don't look so incredulous. I can't very well wear orange with my complexion. Red is a possibility, but I haven't killed anyone; whereas you have to admit my getting in here in the first place required some mad skills. I am mad, you know. Can't you tell by my appearance? Be honest."

Officer Prettybone smiled sardonically to let me know I wasn't fooling her one bit as she nevertheless grabbed a green pair at the waist and whisked them free without upsetting the remaining stacks and slapped them down on my expectant arms.

Before crawling into this green potato sack I inquired once more about the possibility of getting back my own space suit. The guard said after lock up she would go take a look at the progress they were making in processing my belongings. What part of no do you not understand, Hater said. I hated that baggy green jumpsuit. No matter where I tried my tail could not find a comfortable spot. It thrashed around in the seat area, tried first one leg hole then the other. It looked like a cobra trapped in a gunny sack. I actually spoke to my girl, chastising her for the uncooperative attitude.

The pretty young jailor tried to act amused to overcome the look of horror taking shape, then to her credit offered

solicitude. She was capable of experiencing something called empathy, where you actually try to imagine the pain someone other than yourself is feeling. Empathy doesn't exist in every member of our species to an equal degree. I'd say only about one in a thousand denizens possesses this special quality.

Nadezhda and Hater both had it in abundance, helping to explain why I liked them both so much. At first I didn't think Nadezhda had any at all until I saw her around little children. On those occasions her concern for others gushed from some deep emotional reserve and her beauty moved me in turn and inspired me by its strength when most people would mistake her tears for weakness. These ruminations caused me to frown remembering her sweetness and loving kindness. The jailor misinterpreted my mood and told me not to worry. I looked fine, she said.

I didn't care much for the jail cell accommodations beyond the obvious loss of freedom. For one thing, the door sealed hermetically, creating an atmosphere over time difficult to breath, stale and dank. I'm sure there must have been a system of air recirculation operating somehow. It was as though the entire concrete interior had been lamented with plastic, impervious to nail or bone. On both sides of this reasonably spacious rectangular room the floor curved up to a bench curving up to the wall. No sharp edges available for facilitating the least bit of violence. At the far end sat a stainless-steel

toilet without seat or lid, and next to it a stainless steel sink with a water spout and a press button loosing a miniscule trickle.

I familiarized myself with the various amenities and I sat down on one of the monolithic benches hard and unyielding under my well-padded behind. I sat there for a while before lying down. Those were pretty much my two options. From somewhere else on the premises came the muffled cries of a commotion. I lay there listening in a philosophical manner and reflecting on the caged beast aspect of incarceration and the problematics inherent in prisons for profit. I mean, if you were really going to make a go of it as a business, you would have to find a way to keep the cells full. As an investor in a prison you'd be best served by encouraging victimless crimes since you didn't want society to fall apart, you just needed warm bodies. But what could you make illegal? It would have to be some essentially harmless thing that most everybody nevertheless enjoys. Then it hit me. Sex. Sex is a thing that most everybody enjoys. Making sex illegal would definitely insure that you kept the beds filled, mostly with gay men and women, who wouldn't mind the close proximity that much anyway. I didn't mind incarceration that much. I tried to enjoy life regardless of my surroundings.

The door to my private room swung open and about a dozen floozies filed into the drunk tank like a troupe of exhausted

drag queens exiting the stage and entering the communal dressing room after the curtain call of a raucously successful dinner show, each diva proclaiming the grandeur of her own performance while remaining tone deaf and heedless to anything anybody else had to say. They were all women; I'm just saying they resembled men in drag.

A sober dame sat nearby me on the bench. She watched the other inmates perched on the edge of her seat like an avid fan at a sporting event or an attendee of a circus awed and enthralled by the spectacle.

"We were in the drunk tank next to this one," She said spontaneously, without looking at me, as though I'd asked.

"Three bull dykes attacked a young girl because they wanted to strip her naked and force her into sex."

"What happened?" I queried, not too eager, not too soft.

"All hell broke loose! Fighting and screaming. Scratching. Biting. Hair pulling. Like you couldn't believe. The policemen come in and ordered the rest of us out into the hallway, except the rapers and the victim. They were easy enough to spot. Little bitch half naked and sniveling. They took her out and locked the three bulls in and left them there and made the rest of us come over here."

I contemplated the natty dreads profusing down her back. The victim in question was ushered through the door a moment

later, her clothes restored and her modesty protected in spite of the obvious rips and tears. She collapsed in the middle of the floor and passed out unconscious. I was glad the predators were sequestered in the next cell and not ours because the last thing I wanted was trouble. We sat around and contemplated the young girl and I'm sure I was not the only one to weigh the fact her defenses would not resist another onslaught.

My potential cellie cast her gaze towards me, twisting her neck about, down and to the side, not looking into my eyes, concentrating instead on my prison garb before whipping her attention round again scanning the room populated now by the other inmates, most slumping on the benches as the excitement drained from them. I saw no indication of a signal. They descended on the young victim who woke up to find herself put upon by a dozen pairs of hands. They had her dainty panties off and stuffed them in her mouth to stifle her cries. They bit, kissed, licked until her body turned traitor and pleasure flooded her brain and her mind was defeated and forsook all thought of resistance. In the course of a long night they turned her. There wasn't anything I could do. It wasn't me, nor anyone I knew. Besides, I'd been her at one time. You don't die from it. You'll live.

I always considered questions as a good means of perpetuating conversation with a stranger. Some might bristle at

the pestering. I could tell this one didn't mind. My gentle prodding provided her the opportunity to talk about herself, clearly her favorite subject. It wasn't a question of whether or not she would take me sexually; it was more a matter of how soon. My guess was she would dominate me like an octopus embracing a young hermit crab, slow and steady, prying from every angle. Never forced or violent, her sexual pressure would be inexorable.

As she began her preliminary grappling, I said, "You know, Sappho was a famous poet, considered one of the very best in the olden days."

Her face hardened a bit in response to my factoid.

"I thought she was a famous dyke."

I wished to assuage her discomfiture.

"She was probably pretty good at both."

"Well I ain't writing no poetry," and after momentary reflection she laughed at her declaration as though it were a witticism.

I've never been an outgoing or gregarious person. For most of my life I've been engaged in pushing away other people's nonsense, a full-time job if you happen to be institutionalized. You can't very well go it alone in close quarters given the very real possibility someone under the influence of the slightest resentment might drive a sharply honed plastic eating utensil

into your liver. Maybe it's the way I carry myself, haughty and aloof, as a means of covering up for deep seated feelings of insecurity and anxiety. I hoped the chief or magistrate would call me for questioning before this vulgar woman pushed herself on me any farther.

She was flashing hard looks from time to time at the pile of naked flesh writhing on the floor a few feet away. If she was so needy for sex she'd have joined them.

"So you a crazy green machine?"

"I'm sorry. I don't know what that mean."

Sappho reached over and fingered the hem of my green jumpsuit.

"Green means psych ward. You crazy, chika?"

"I'm not sure. I mean, if I were, how would I know, right? I think they mean to find out and then let me know."

My benefactress drew a grim and rueful smile, saying, "You don't know the answer to that question, maybe the ward am the place for you." She pondered the quandary my presence presented.

"You dangerous?"

I carefully curtailed my answer so it didn't sound like an immediate threat: "I burned down a few houses. The only people who died probably deserved it."

Sappho snorted. "Well hell, who hasn't? I smoked a whole barracks full of troopers once after they put their hands on me. They won't ever make that mistake again."

I nodded in sage commiseration.

"I never killed anyone unless they were threatening my friends. But now, I don't want to do that anymore."

"If that's your attitude, you ain't so crazy then."

"I think they put me in these duds because they didn't know what else to do. I'm awaiting psychological evaluation. So in answer to what you were saying, yes I'm crazy, no I'm not dangerous. Not for you I'm not. Least of all, you."

"You got a nice tongue on you, girl. Talk all sweet and purty." I thought I'd gotten through to her, then she narrowed her eyes. "You smart of something?"

"I suppose so."

"You suppose so? For such a smart girl you don't know much for sure."

"I can read and write, but you won't tell anybody, will you?"

"Damn girl, what I look like to you? I ain't no snitching bitch. Damn, I don't say nothing to nobody round this joint."

I flinched at her outburst at first, fearing I'd aroused her anger, but her rough declaration had been followed by a

secret shared. I could feel one of her tentacles tightening, and I dared not brush it away.

When they dumped me into the holding cell I expected them to come fetch me for interrogation sooner rather than later. They fooled me. The crew on the law and order side of the steel door cleared their desktops and called it a night. The job would still be there in the morning. The night shift alerted the day shift of my unique presence in their fine establishment. I could sense the wubba wubba wubba of their voice waves. It was enough. A woman appeared in the smash proof glass and looked left and right, surveying the cell without catching sight of me. She opened the cell door and stepped into the room and didn't seem concerned by the naked female forms asleep in a pile on the floor but she did a double take when she eyed me in the corner. She represented a lot of blonde attitude stuffed into a blue nylon uniform. I smiled at her stiff, official awkwardness, and because she felt embarrassed she overcompensated for it by staring me down like a dog. The Bull may have gone farther to regain face and assert her superiority if Sappho hadn't greeted her and drawn her anger off me. They held a brief meeting of the minds. I kept my gaze lowered until she exited the cell and closed the door behind her. Sappho informed me she was Officer Stickupherwhat, Officer Stick for short.

"I don't think she likes me," I meekly murmured.

"It's like anything else around here. You gotta show respect to get respect."

I found Sappho's advice hackneyed to an irritating degree. I didn't plan on sticking around long enough to learn the rules. The way Officer Stick punked me made my talons flex. I'd almost rather get socked in the face than punked because bruises heal eventually, and if you put up a good fight and did your best then there's shame in getting your ass beat a little. Whereas if you just sit there and take it and allow yourself to be shamed, it bruises your psyche, your spirit, and that kind of mark can turn into a purple bruise and fester, leaving a mark forever.

My friend the erstwhile poet curled up at my feet on the bench and seeing no more hope for mayhem of any kind this night snuggled down and fell asleep. Unfortunately, those leaden, oppressive walls subdued my spirit and dampened my imagination. Unable to expand outwards and find any new germ of inspiration my thoughts were driven inward like the spikes of an iron maiden and I felt myself pierced by memories, each one negative and cringeworthy and I lamented how bad thoughts never lost their piquancy and good thoughts never flourished unless called forth constantly. I exerted my genial powers to illuminate the good times and veil in shadows the bad. At least they didn't drag me down into catacombs of despair. I didn't triumph over depression until I rejoiced at the well of preserved memories of my lost

friends and raised their voices for solace in my lonely solitude.

Within the seclusion of my prison, locked away from the sun and time's passage, I possessed no means for gauging how long I languished. Only when the tank door gasped open and my blonde paramour stuck her head in signaling for me to accompany her out into the hallway did I realize I had stayed awake all night and a new day had dawned. Insomnia was never an excuse for not showing up.

Blondie and a couple of meatballs in uniform escorted me into the medical area for a physical exam. I kept quiet about the shower I'd received on admittance. Never look a gift horse in the mouth, I always say. This time they didn't allow me to wash myself. Two psychiatric nurses, one wielding a sponge and the other a brush on the end of a handle, scrubbed at me as though I were a bronze statue badly in need of cleaning. I didn't mind until the slave with the bristle brush ran the working end across the underside of my tail and the tonsured rectangle reached home sweet home when I protested such rough handling in a most piteous tone. My plaintive mewling, much to my surprise, elicited a chagrined apology from the shame faced nurse. Afterwards they toweled my body dry and worked at my dreads without a whole lot of success before taking ahold of my wrists and dragging me onto the exam table and locking my ankles into

the stirrups. I might have resisted, knowing what they were after.

The doctor entered the room a short while later. He glanced my way not to acknowledge I existed as a unique individual but simply to confirm the specimen had been deposited on the slab where it belonged. I've never been very impressed by doctors as a species. No doubt I wouldn't hesitate to avail one of his services if I found myself in sorest need. Let me begin there and then proceed to the shortcomings of their education. The one quality a good doctor needs above all others is a solid memory. How else could anyone be bothered with remembering every bone and vein in the entire human body? In addition, they need to exceed at mathematics, the placement of a decimal point or two amounting to the difference between life or death for the patient. I know how I feel after eating lunch, and so I can only marvel at their afternoon powers of concentration since their primary duties include prescribing and cutting. A steady hand and ice water nerves. The most salient quality a doctor must possess is indifference. Cold, aloof, objective, cruel, as he stabs his fingers into you and in response to your moaning protest distractedly inquiring, "Oh, does it hurt right there?" I know. We would be in a world of much greater pain without them, but they should really give the attitude a rest. After all, they really are nothing more than the King's servant.

He asked me if everything actually worked, and I assured him it did. He then asked if any of my various parts ever interacted with each other. I told him the type of interaction he was postulating would be anatomically impossible. While it was true my parts had worked wonders with the parts from partners of both sexes my parts had never bent themselves towards satisfying each other. The doctor also took a certain professional interest in the role my tail played in my life. As though aware the doctor was talking about her Tail began switching playfully back and forth. Speaking for both of us I explained our relationship as best I could, stating it didn't matter where I went, Tail always accompanied me, and thus I was never alone. I also told him about my friends, the voices I carried in my head. My nether anatomy had so captured his attention he didn't seem to hear me. He wasn't that sort of a doctor anyway. He asked me if I'd been sexually active lately and I lied and said no. I don't know why. You don't lie to your doctor. You lie to your lawyer. He then had his way with me under the Sacred Vessel provision granted to him by the One True Book. He poked and prodded and penetrated me until I told him I now needed to change my answer about recent sexual activity. To my surprise he found my remark funny.

"The plutocrats will have their pound of flesh. You've got nothing to worry about in this settlement. We generally don't

report denizens to any authority higher than our own tribunal. I wasn't necessarily looking for evidence of abortion. They asked me to examine you to determine whether or not you present a public danger." He paused and looked at me with those eyes tired of the lies people tell him. "Do you present a danger to the public safety?"

"No, I don't think so," I answered. I thought that was an honest answer for the most part, even though I felt self-conscious. "I'm not a random danger. I usually give as good as I get."

"You're not violent towards humans?"

"Not unless I'm provoked."

"Do you think anyone here is provoking you?"

"No, I feel like I've been treated fairly by everyone here, so far."

"You don't carry any diseases or viruses?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Not to your knowledge." He smiled for some reason. "Would you have any objection to my taking a blood sample?"

"No, I wouldn't mind. I'm surprised you're asking so nicely. Will it hurt?"

"You'll feel a pin prick, some slight pressure. You might feel a little discomfort."

"No permanent damage?" Again, he laughed and smiled without mirth.

A nurse entered the room during our interview and heard my response and scurried to fetch the necessary implements from a nearby drawer anticipating the doctor's request.

These two vampires worked together to tap one of my veins and fill several small phials full. I always thought the predilection the Powers That Be exhibited for other people's bodily fluids to be a little strange. Like their obsession with other people's bodily functions, such inquiries never turned out to be benign in nature.

"If you wish to think of me as dead, please feel free to do so, because I was once, you know. Dead, I mean."

"You've been through something," the Good Doctor said.
"That's plain to see."

He completed his medical examination, leaving no part of my person un-probed. For some reason I stopped minding. Not even when he discovered my teeth and remarked how beautifully they shined. He pulled a round stool over and sat next to me where I lay on the slab so his head remained that much more elevated than mine. He held my chart out towards the nurse and she came forward to retrieve it, avoiding any contact with me, who could have eaten her alive, little rabbit, her gaze fastened on the Great Healer who sternly ignored her, drawing a smile to her

full lips. I must have been off my game and distracted because I didn't really notice what a complete young package she was until she was sashaying towards the exit.

"I'm now going to ask you a question because hearing the answer from you is going to help me make my final determination about your case, and I need for you to tell me the truth, to be as truthful as you can."

I was perplexed as to why he assumed I would be untrue.

"I'll be as honest as I can," I said, feeling guilty for no good reason.

"Honesty is of greatest importance because I need to know how it is you feel about yourself if I'm to treat you properly. What I need to hear you say is this: What are you? In your own words, how would you describe what you are?"

"I'm a monster." Tears gathered in the corners of my eyes and fell forth across my lovely face.

"Were you always a monster? What I mean to ask is, were you born this way?"

"No, I wasn't this way. I wasn't always like this. Once upon a time, way back when, I used to be a little girl. Then after that I was a young woman. Then I died."

"What did you die from? Can you remember?"

I was struck by the perfect placidity with which he accepted my answers.

"It may have been the cancer, or it certainly would have been the cancer, eventually, but then the heat waves came, you know, the dying time. So I'm not really sure. To answer your question as truthfully as I can, I can't remember. It's like, when death came, I wasn't there anymore. Know what I mean?"

"I think I understand. So you had a cancer diagnosis, and you knew you didn't have long to live, and then the Dying Time came, or the Heavy Heat, as some call it." He spoke of the event as though somehow he had stayed objectively outside its ravages the entire time. If he had, I wondered how.

"That's correct," I said, wanting to make my statement as clear and concise as I was able. "It was either cancer or the heat, or possibly both at the same time. I really can't remember."

The doctor crossed his legs and interlaced his fingers around the top knee in preparation for a flight of fancy.

"You know, when some people die and they are successfully revived, they provide testimony afterwards to the effect that while they were dead they experienced, oh I don't know, a kind of out of body experience, they call it, where they describe... oh I don't know, how would you describe it? Their soul rising up out of their body and floating above themselves so they could actually look back and see their body lying there; while others have describe seeing, oh I don't know, a bright light at the end

of a tunnel. That sort of thing. I don't know if you even believe in that sort of thing, a kind of religious experience, a floating sensation, bright lights. How long were you dead, by the way? Do you happen to know?"

"I wasn't gone very long. They came and collected my body pretty quickly, those nerd boys in their cooler suits. An hour at the most, I should think. I remember bright light, but it wasn't the great beyond or anything. It was just the sun coming up that day, brighter and hotter than ever, and the denizens lying on the floor of the hospice all grey as such, crawling away from the beams in a fright. It was so hot the rays were scorching the Earth."

"That was quite a phenomenon, I remember. So what happened next? Any more memories?"

"No, not really. That's about it. I closed my eyes, and total darkness. Not even that. Total blank, and when I woke up, I was someone else, what you see here, with no memories in between. It's funny, ironic as they say. I always used to wish that I could be someone else living somewhere else, living a different life."

"But no out of body experience while you were flat-lined, no bright light beckoning you forward?"

"No. Nothing like that. No afterlife or anything. Just blank. A blank space."

The doctor unlocked his hands and uncrossed his legs placing both feet squarely on the floor. He pressed his thighs and closed his eyes nodding vigorously, accepting with full credence my testimony.

He opened his eyes as he stood up. "You were in a government hostel, then? You'd signed in and relinquished all rights to your mortal remains?"

"It wasn't government run, no. It was a charity organization run by the Dark Matter Corporation. I mean, yeah, I signed away my mortal remains. I thought, what difference could it make? I was going to be dead anyway. I wouldn't care what they did with my body afterwards. I just wanted to lie between clean sheets one more time before it happened. It never occurred to me they'd play a trick as dirty as this."

"Sure, sure," the Doctor said, pinching his nose and nodding. "I can see the wisdom in that. Did they modify you beforehand? Or warn you they might use your body parts later on for experiments in longevity?"

"Nobody ever said anything about longevity. They told me to read the papers and sign if I wanted admittance. To tell you the truth, I just signed without reading it. What did I care? I had no idea this would be the result. I was dying, for goodness sake. My thoughts didn't go any further beyond the fact itself."

"No, no, of course not. Although you should always read any legally binding contract before signing it, but I get your point. You wanted to go peacefully." He dragged his stool aside and went to stand at the head of the bed where I couldn't see him. "This plate in your cranium. This was in place when you awoke and you have no memory of them implanting it?"

"Correct. None at all."

"I see. I see. Do you mind if I inspect it for you?"

"I don't mind. Just go lightly."

"Is it sensitive, or feel fragile?"

"No, but it's covering my brain. See what I'm saying?"

"Sure. Sure. Is it a tight fit? Any pain? Any problems?"

"The plate is very snug."

"Snug? Snug. Interesting choice of words. And it never hurts? No pain? No? Does it feel sensitive around the edges? Can you feel me touching your scalp, here?"

"I can feel your fingers touching me there, but it doesn't hurt. It's not painful. I'd say it's healed."

"Good. Good. I don't mean to hurt you. I'll be as gentle as I can be. Fascinating. By any chance do you know who worked on you?"

"The Powers That Be."

"I mean, the surgery itself."

"His minions. A bunch of teenagers, if you ask me."

"Teenagers? You can't be much more than an adolescent yourself."

"I don't know how old Hater was when he killed himself. He always seemed like a little punk to me."

"Hader? Is that the name of the individual who donated the body?"

"I'm not sure he donated his body. Powersby got ahold of it somehow. Stole it from a pauper's grave, most likely."

"What leads you to believe the transaction was illegitimate?"

"He blew his brains out. I doubt he bothered to sign a waiver. They're always saying how you can't do anything without a contract, but that's not true. They can do anything they want."

"And so the bullet created this hole and the surgeons simply exploited the opportunity."

"Exploited. Yes. Good word."

"And you think the female to male transplant caused the tissue growth, the tail, the genitalia?"

"I could feel it happening."

"A remarkable equilibrium seems to have been established. Every time you move your arms or shift your legs I can see the male to female transference, and yet overall you're remarkably stable. Very balanced."

"It comes and goes. I can feel myself changing. It's not over yet."

"That's how you would describe the metamorphosis? It comes and goes? Sometimes your changing, and sometimes you're not."

"I think it must be like that moment when ancient man saw a sharply curved stone, but when he looked again, he envisioned a tool for scraping an animal hide, or like those cave paintings when the outcropping and stalactites were smeared with colored pigment and transformed into a bison. I'm not one sex or the other, I'm both you see. I'm a bifurcated form, both at the same time. I'm something new, a third reality, a sur-reality."

"What about the voices you mentioned before? What role do they play?"

"They're a pain in the rear, mostly, just like they were in life. I didn't say butt I said rear. Rear is acceptable. Oh stop. Whatever."

"You see an important difference in the nomenclature?"

"Oh, not you doctor. Sorry. No. Nevermind. They're jabbering away right now. They make it hard to concentrate sometimes."

"Do the voices ever tell you to do things? To harm yourself? Or to do harm to others?"

"No they're not dangerous. I can be. They're not. Sometimes I get tired, and I let them take charge and I go away for a

while, for a little peace and quiet. Sometimes when I'm traveling and I don't know what to do I ask them and they give me good advice."

"Do they ever give you bad advice? Or direct you to do bad things? For example, do the voices ever tell you to hurt certain people?"

"Goodness no! Never! My friends are good people. They'd never want to hurt anyone on purpose. They're not like that at all. They're peaceful humanitarian types."

"Have you yourself ever hurt anybody on purpose?"

A fright of ugly memories flashed through my brain pan.

"No, never," I mumbled. I didn't mean to sound petulant.

"Remember when we had that conversation earlier about telling me the truth?" Dude was on to me in a flash.

"So which are you?" I craned my neck around so I could look at him as he said it: "Are you my doctor or my lawyer?" I smiled into his momentary confusion and grinned my most succulent grin. I flipped back to my previous position. "Or maybe you're my Father Confessor."

"I'm a man of science," he said, walking around the bed and heading towards my file on the small counter and flipping through making a few notations. "Can I do anything else for you?"

"Have any of those synthetic heroin pills?" You can't blame a girl for trying. He looked around at me with a grim smile on his face. I quickly said, "Just kidding. No, what I really need is my all terrain suit. I need it to maintain my sense of equilibrium. If I don't wear it, my tail gets awfully sore."

"When I submit my report I'll make a recommendation to the commandant specifying that he let you wear your suit."

Before I left the examination room I asked the doctor to cut a hole in the seat of my jumpsuit to accommodate my swinging tail. People would either have to like it or lump it, but I wasn't going to have it cramped up anymore. Like the ancient philosopher said, you have to let your freak flag fly.

On my way out I encountered the tight package of the nurse whose neck was bent towards some unknown medicinals and unaware and thus unsuspecting of my mischievous tail which I have oftentimes characterized possessing a will beyond my control. I must admit I played the part of a willing accomplice positioning my body at an angle accommodating my tail to swing about freely and lodge itself like an overly friendly dog might do with its hard and elongated snout.

Nurse Tightly let out a yelp snapping her thighs together and instinctively swatting away the offending intruder by landing a slap across the armorial tip sending an impulse of pain revealing a level of sensitivity I had heretofore not known

to have existed. The pain was sharp and sent my elongated companion in a flash to seek shelter between my thighs.

"Stop that," Nurse Tightly remonstrated, spinning around to admonish me for taking such a flagrant liberty, undercut by an adolescent sparkle in her smiling eyes denoting a sense of humor and a readiness to dish back whatever she was served.

"That kind of hurt," I pouted, hand on hips while cutting a small circle to walk off the pain.

Immediately, Nurse Nightly transformed into the epitome of concern. Her life dedicated to assuaging pain in others, she appeared mortified at having inflicted a hurt on a fellow human being. Although it was my own tail and the pain registered in my brain, I can't really blame her for brushing away the beastly intrusion.

I slide out of my green covering, stood naked before her, my hormones broiling in response to her solicitations of my randy friend who considering her rudeness instigated the scene and didn't deserve the loving caring hands-on attention she administered. One moment she was a girl saucy and swishing, perched impertinently on my coccyx bone, a boy the next. Am I one to be dictated to by a flexible stack of cartilage. Let the question rhetorical resonate unto the ages.

"I'm sorry. You know often times she acts and reacts in ways beyond my control."

"She's a rascal. That's for sure."

"I'm glad you feel she's a she."

Nurse Rightly ran her softly caressing hand the length of my appendage with a dexterity sending shivers up my spine.

"Does it still hurt?"

"I think you've cured me."

My fingers extended like claws. I wanted to pounce on Nurse Pretty and pin her to the floor where I could claw her flesh and knead her back. Imagine what the good Doctor's surprise would have been upon walking in and catching us together, his Nurse Precious, whom he had assiduously refrained from thinking about in a lascivious manner, caught in an unrestrained carnal embrace. Her wrists and ankles pinioned by my claws become cages while only her middle parts, the soft moist center, wriggle about obscenely, struggling some but not too much, the more vehemently the victim struggles beneath the weight of the succubus and if this nightmare didn't end soon the lungs might empty of air and if this nightmare doesn't end soon I will snap her bones and suck the virgin marrow, I will trounce her in ways the earnest Doctor Lovejoy could never imagine. Her toes clench and unclench and clench again in air. One overarching shudder and this other stiffens into a kind of rigid rigor mortise. Her eyeballs frantically searching the insides of her eye flaps, searching for an escape route leading to a darkened realization.

I can't believe this is happening to me. I can't let myself go this way, I musn't surrender. I was raised a good girl. Fine. I don't care I don't... I lick away the fluids, eat the membrane, like an animal mother cleaning her newborn calf.

In the morning I don't recognize my suit folded neatly on the kitchen table. Nurse Nimble wears a sexy kimono from a land she's never seen. I'm like a kimono dragon stalking upright until I slip into my suit and I feel myself again, a well breasted woman with dreadlocks and a visibly hard lunar surface. Teeth white and shiny, pointed and sharp, evolved for biting and ripping the flesh of enemies and prey. Claws sharp for clutching and tearing, an elongated tail for poise and balance. Prehensile feet and toes like claws. Pagan and sexual, I am beyond good and evil, sexually fulfilled without guilt or shame.

"They brought it by this morning. They said feel free to put it on and wear it, but arrive at the Tribunal by ten o'clock."

"They left a lot of instructions."

"They were very serious."

"I'm sure they were. I'm a very serious person, too," I said, smiling. I grabbed my suit from where it lay and gave it a good flounce before stepping into it. "You won't be in trouble, will you? Consorting with the enemy?"

"They don't know anything specific, unless you tell them. Please don't tell them."

"Then they won't ever know anything. I'm not the chatty type."

She was curled around a cup of coffee hinged on one finger. "What if they make you take an oath? Would you talk about us under oath?"

I searched through her cupboards until I found myself a porcelain cup. "Under oath? What's that?" Then I looked around but didn't see a pot. "Is that real coffee? Can I have some, too?" She didn't answer my question. It was not real, of course, but she had coffee flavored caffeine crystals, which wasn't bad.

They mistrusted me to the extend their High Tribunal had summoned me to appear before them as part of an investigation into the motive behind my sudden appearance. They already knew my bloody intent had been quelled the instant I learned how I'd been let loose upon them under false pretenses. They were a curious tribe, granting me house arrest, entrusting me to the care of a psychiatric nurse, trusting her to spend the night with me, alone. Maybe I was kidding myself about privacy and intimacy. I usually got along well with psychiatric staff. They were as crazy as I was.

Maybe I was still in the psyche ward. That would make better sense. They escorted me in belly chains from the confines

of the psych ward to stand trial for alien sedition and the entirety of the intervening mess. I made up my mind to hide the fact I was thrown on my back while a handful of guards subdued me and the rest took turns mortifying my flesh. They say History is written by the winners. So what if in my memories I'm always the last woman standing. I can't remember clearly anymore. So what if it happened both ways.

What on Earth was I thinking. Considering my wanton ways an air of inevitability wafted me towards the high tribunal in honor of their summons. From the rib of the law The Powers That Be fashioned me an helpmeet in the form of Joan Dark who stood between the marbled columns supporting the arches of justice where so many humans had been served their portion of justice and then some till the whole nation grew bloated with justice and fat and sassy reclined on their couches waiting on justice day.

She appeared gorgeous on sight and I wanted her immediately in a way she both deplored and exploited in her white silk blouse and groovy leathers and mismatching coat. She cocked her elbow in a straight arm grasping my grip, greeting and repelling at the same time. Thus far and no farther shall I greet you. Boundaries set, she escorted me into the building through the massive wooden entrance on the other side of which stood two armed guards, first responders who manhandled me for public

safety's sake. Frisked and wanded I was lead through the halls of justice by my chaperon and guide until we stood before courtroom K. My arrival stirred more than one onlooker to rise from their wooden waiting bench and relocate their seat seeing the show was about to start.

The Trial Portion

I am an unclean beast. In darkness I dwell. I'm far worse than the legends about me. I am the primeval nightmare.

"No actual charges have been filed yet," the Dark Lawyer confided to me outside courtroom K. "This will be a preliminary investigation to determine what if any changes will need to be filed based on the evidence given."

I was experiencing a problem following what Lawyer Dark was explaining to me because her gentle tone but obvious legal expertise caused me to feel humble and so my shoulders drooped and rounded and I lowered my gaze and that's when my eyesight first fell upon her marvelous décolletage. I should have been listening to what she was saying. What can I say? They were a nice pair, and when my trial was over, I hoped I'd be able to put my hands on them before they threw me into some dungeon cell or executed me outright.

"Don't worry," my lawyer said, noticing my downcast state. "You'll get a fair hearing. The Elders in this enclave like to hear all the facts before they make any judgements."

"Will they torture me? Excuse me, I mean, use enhanced interrogation techniques, before they execute me? They're not going to torch me, are they? I've seen that order carried out enough times by the Ecumenical Council. I don't want to go out of life that way. Promise you won't let them burn me."

Lawyer Von Tease became dismissive and matter of fact in her response to my pleading with her for leniency. "We don't do that here. Not going to happen." Then she smiled with sweet, sardonic sympathy. "Not on my watch," she said, and she hugged me reassuringly with a nice titty rub in the process. I found her ministrations on my behalf most reassuring.

I'd been alone for so long and inside my own mind left alone in the desert wasteland the milk of human kindness dispensed by a woman I'd only recently met brought tears to my eyes more than anything, not jail nor trial, but the kindness and strength behind her gesture made me lachrymose for indifferent humanity. Unless she was playing me by some unseen angle I couldn't grip, this outpost operated by a set of rules I'd never seen before. A jail is a jail is a jail and the denizens therein resemble one another interchangeably. In the daytime these folks were different. I couldn't get over how

sober they all seemed, and how clean the streets and the buildings, old as buildings always are, were well kept on the inside, in spite of how dirty their facades.

The judges gavel cracking shattered my reverie and the lawyer Joan of D'ark patted and rubbed me on the back and took ahold of my elbow and steered me to a table up front near the judge who was, knock me over with a ballpeen hammer, a woman. I'd never seen a woman judge before. Women were either cloistered wives or whores. In that crazy enclave they actually let women take part in civic life, a real throwback to ancient times. For some reason it surprised me to discover that a female judge could be just as big a jerk as a male one. I guess I expected her to be different. Don't know why. The only tribunals I'd ever seen were men-only with some poor friendless woman standing before the priests and burgers, bowing her head as a show of humbleness and respect her only expedient for escaping the flames.

My heart beat faster as you might well imagine, not because I feared the judgement of the tribunal or the very real violence a negative outcome could ignite. The possibility worrying me the was the ever increasing likelihood I might be called upon to do some public speaking, a prospect daunting enough to choke off my breathing. I don't know why I fear exposure of that kind as badly as I do, but I do. I'd rather they had formed a firing

squad and allowed my lawyer to enter a guilty plea on my behalf than stand up in front of the general assemblage gathered there in order to plead my case. I guess I'd rather public speak than be burned alive, but my lawyer had already told me that punishment was off the table.

The crowd looked to be mostly oldsters, at least the spectators and the judges, and these latter looked to be august personages. Positioned in between were the really dangerous players, young lawyers, ambitious and driven by the dangerous desire to be somebody. They were just as smart as I was if not more so, only they had the power of speech and could think on their feet, so they weren't smarter; but they had multiple little intelligences. They were camped out at the big table on the right next to ours. I scrutinized their overall presentation and found it wanting in comparison to my own court appointed champion. Even though I didn't fully know what to expect thus far the atmosphere in the room felt much more civilized than any kangaroo court I'd ever stood in front of accused of being female basically and how do you plead? I glanced around at the crowd and met gasps and whisperers who looked more curious than hostile or condemnatory.

The pressure to know about me rose among the spectators in the room because they didn't know how to take me and therefore could not be counted on as friendly. It really could have gone

either way. Who could I turn to in these egregious straights other than my own solicitor? I fancied she felt my nerves tightening and wanted to preclude my winding so tightly I might jam or worse my wheels and cogs burst forth in every direction. Fight or flee, take your pick. I felt ready to fling myself forward and savage the first neck, its plump and purple vein pumping the rich red juice. The mouth is always agape and ajar after such an attack. The eyes full of shock, stoned and astonished. The whole tumultuous mob whispered indiscreetly forcing blood into my temples. I must have worn a fearful scowl, my monster trapped in a cage look, for the judges to weigh and consider during the inquest about to begin.

The Chief Magistrate had only to tap her gavel twice silencing the general hubbub. He gave a brief introductory speech I couldn't clearly understand. I mean, I knew what the words meant, but I was confused by the order of the syntax indicating they had special meanings in this context I'd never before heard.

My lawyer, bless her heart, sat rigid and alert in her seat, bright eyed and one could only imagine bushy tailed. If she'd been a penis she could not have sat more erect. I don't know why I would've described her that way. Maybe because she was coming off as masculine, or maybe because tension filled the

room and perversity offered the only possibility of relaxing the fight or flee instinct.

"Will the defendant please rise."

Suddenly Joan the Barrister turned sideways in her chair toward me and silently insisted I rise with her. When I got to my feet I was pleasantly surprised to discover my body wasn't trembling although I did feel jammed up and awkward with my thighs pressed to the edge of the table top and the chair hard against the crooks in my knees.

"Does the stranger understand why she is the subject of this inquest?"

My lawyer looked at me and nodded, prompting me to answer. "No, I do not, I am unclear as to the purpose of these proceedings." The public pressure squashed the contractions right out of my speech. I figured it was best to start with the truth in case I had to deviate from it later on, but I already understood that the Corporation had lied to me. I didn't exactly feel obligated to cover for them. These new people seemed reasonable thus far. They hadn't beaten, raped, water-boarded or otherwise tortured me, which was nice.

"Council will confer with the defendant."

"Yes, your honor," Joan Dark said. Sitting me down next to her again my ampersand ear and her sweet breath redolent with peppermint blew cool and fragrant with her lascivious tongue

darting about inside her moist mouth. For the life of me I couldn't understand a single word she was saying. I would have wished for a more thorough debriefing. I wished for a private debriefing. I remove her briefs, and she could remove mine. I imagined a soft black leather couch in a tastefully appointed private office located in a tall building uptown, but that couldn't have been right. She was a public defender, not some hotshot high-priced lawyer they had appointed to a wastrel like me.

"Do you understand now?"

I swung my head around and leaned over and brushed my lips across hers on the way to her ear hole where I breathed, "Not really. Tell it to me again", and I offered my ear hole in return. I flashed back to the orphanage where my birth mother abandoned me and the diabolical young creature who occupied the top bunk had seduced me at a tender young age whispering into my virgin ears her wanton expressions and tamping them in with the tip of her dainty tongue. The judge's eyes were lit with merriment, and by her sense of humor I knew her to be wise.

"Now I get it," I said, loud enough for the judges and the spectators to hear. I rose without being prompted and calmly announced to the Woman herself, "Your honor, I understand why I'm here. My most excellent council has made explicit my

position, and I would just like to say that I want to cooperate in any way I can in throwing myself at the mercy of the court."

A titter fluttered across the spectators. I didn't take that as a bad sign. I know I'm weird and express myself oddly at times. I've gotten used to the laughter and sneers.

During my speech learned council had risen to stand at my side once more. She seemed less sure of herself, as though I had rendered her obsolete by speaking for myself. I suddenly realized she was a lot younger than I thought. We lived in a world run by teenagers.

"Are you willing to take an oath to that effect? Can you either swear or affirm that what you say will be the truth?"

At that juncture the Inquisition objected, or asked for a point of order, or something procedural. I thought their interruption of the proceedings rather rude and impertinent, and I was about to give them a piece of my mind but my council interceded with a bit of head wagging most grave. The villain at the prosecution's table contended since the question of my humanity was an issue central to the inquest, the matter of my humanity would have to be settled first, since a mutant only counted as some fraction of a person, and my testimony couldn't be heard by the court until the court was fully satisfied as to my legal status. Everybody seemed to see that one coming but me, so I calmed my vicious tongue.

"Is the creature aware of the Book of Days and Years," a grey haired old magistrate down at the far end inquired. Apparently there wasn't much standing on formality here. Anybody could just pipe up any time they'd a mind to, I thought in disappointment.

"Yes, your worship," I said. Even in this enlightened place.

"How did you come by your knowledge of the One Book?"

"I read it for myself," I said, a slight breeze of astonishment sweeping across the room. I felt emboldened by my continued success in shocking the audience. If the judge and my council knew the law, I figured the prohibition against educating girls and young women didn't stretch with full force at least into this settlement. I was wrong. Even here a woman reading was controversial.

Yet another judge, a man with perfect brown hair and flat eye glasses who I judged to be at that dangerous age butted in and said, "How did you manage to come by such an ability?"

"A woman taught me my letters when I was very young. In spite of knowing it was illegal. I think maybe it was a revolutionary act on her part, or a complicated revenge plan. I'm not sure. I never got the chance to ask her. She's dead now."

I marveled to myself how easily those explanatory phrases came to me considering I'd never uttered them before to a single soul. I wondered if maybe they'd been percolating subconsciously for a long time.

"Dost know thy numbers," a silver haired, watery eyed old crone demanded without warning.

"No, I never learned numbers."

Rather than appearing disappointed she looked eager to be the one to teach me.

"We can make other inquires later," the Chief Inquisitor, dragging the whole bench back on task. "For now, let us proceed with the preliminary affirmation. Beadle, hand her the One Book, and if you would deign to please the court, read the first line of the first page."

Taking the red and white print book bound in black the Beadle handed me I opened the oversized tome and read as I had been taught.

"When serving a large company the feast you spread should be a banquet for the eyes as well as the pallet."

I paused and peered upwards to gauge the effect of my recitation upon the judges.

"And what do those words signify, child? What do they mean to you? Can you say? In your own words." My girlfriend the mathematician asked.

"Food should not only taste good but look good."

A ripple of approval for my reading spread along the bench, inspiring Judge Numero Uno to declare, "Let the Court stipulate the Creature is literate."

"Objection, Your Honor," my learned council interjected. "Use of the label 'creature' might prove prejudicial." For defending me so adroitly without my even asking I wanted to give girlfriend a hug, and so I did, slipping my arm around her slender waist and gave her a squeeze. She responded with a reassuring pat on my back which seemed to say, "Yes Dear, I'm on your side."

The judge overruled her, probably because it was her word and she liked having thought of it. She said several sentences more and then my girl as well as the three prosecutors at the other table laid gentle and nimble fingertips onto manila case files. The unconscious simultaneity appeared strange to me because I didn't know quite what they were doing.

The first witness called was the doctor and apparently these proceedings constituted some kind of pretrial phase. The first step required establishing whether or not I could be counted as a human being and hence eligible for a trial. Zombies, Maniacs, Mutants, Ghouls, Libertarians, Maniacs, and Frissionists were not dealt with in the mainstream court. They were instead relegated to a military tribunal. My lawyer had

impressed the importance of gaining recognition as a human being because otherwise stripped of my rights and liberties and thrown into a dungeon, or holding cell as they're sometimes called, tantamount to a life sentence since most of the poor sod's waiting their turn to appear before the tribunal had been languishing in their cells for decades.

"Do I qualify as a human being?" I asked the Dark Lady, half fearful of her response.

"You could go either way."

"I always have." You should have seen her face.

On the stand and under oath the Doctor who had examined me testified that I displayed hermaphroditic characteristics typical of both male and female. He informed the court my changeling status was irrelevant because it didn't matter which sex my body assumed, either masculine or feminine, because in both cases the form was human. Granted the dynamism aspect of a changeling fell under the category *Mutatis Mutandis*, but special category exemption subheading 58.14 stipulated certain mutations not impairing brain function or leading to maniacal rage but merrily cosmetic in nature and hence benign were tolerable under section 9, subsection b of the treaty of Utrecht. The malformation of my teeth he deemed in his professional appraisal to be not vampirism, my fangs or incisors being solid and lacking the necessary canals for blood sucking. He cited the

possibility of simple gigantisms while also holding out the possibility for rapacious regression which meant I had the power to bite and rip living flesh but displayed no obvious predilection to do so. The claws and apposable adaption in my feet were again ruled benign adaptations and non-life threatening. To this detail the Inquisition objected stipulating that they intended to produce a rival expert who was willing to testify my claws were retractable and hence of a rapacious nature and hence non-human.

I looked down and studied my hands and realized that in a relaxed state the claws had retracted. I leaned over sideways and whispered something to my attorney about it but she shook her head at me and patted my hands down until they rested on the table. The judge glanced my way and gave me a withering look to keep quiet in her courtroom. I lapsed into sullen acquiescence leaving my hands resting on the table for the whole courtroom to see what were clearly retractable claws not unlike a cat's.

The last bone of contention involved the permanent nature of my tail, which the good doctor characterized as a Grade A retrogressive characteristic connected to or rather an outgrowth of my spine, benign and non-aggressive. The Inquisition again stipulated their expert would offer a challenge to that opinion bringing to light certain evidence showing my tail could possibly under certain circumstances perform a penetrative

sexual function. The little brat, as if to prove she knew she was the center of attention and that people were talking about her, slithered up and down my thigh, surprising me greatly because I hadn't realized I'd been sitting on her the entire time. In the midst of the ongoing discourse I let out a squeal against my will and covered my mouth way too late. Everybody heard it, and mortified, I lay my head down on the table to hide my shame. I heard the Judge demanding of my attorney whether I was alright or not. I sat up and said, "I'm sorry, your Honor, for the interruption. I was experiencing a moment of minor discomfiture. The tail in question oftentimes has a mind of its own." As I was speaking I had to raise up off my seat enough to facilitate the brat back into the support slot running up the spine of my environmental suit.

"Do I need to declare a recess?" The judge asked, not unkindly.

"No, I'm fine. There was a moment there when I felt myself in a bind, but I'm all straightened out now. Sorry for the interruption. Please go on without me. I'm fine."

Appeased by the sincerity of my apology, the judge indicated for the lawyers to continue. With her gavel she clacked the murmuring spectators into silence.

I found these proceedings extraordinary because in any other enclave I'd ever passed through a woman accused of a crime

faced an all-male tribunal, and unless an equally powerful male stood up in her defense, she quickly found herself buried up to her shoulders while the men of the village gathered rocks for stoning her skull. Either that or they bound her to a wooden stake and piled kindling around her feet. It didn't really matter whether Old Testament Law or Sharia Law. Either was a woman alone who ended up dead. I'd never seen a situation like my present one where a woman got a lawyer to argue on her behalf. I never imagined legal proceedings could be so fair minded.

Ultimately, the Judge decided I had enough human left in me, more than the 3/5 requirement, to be eligible for a trial and mount a defense on my own behalf. I was charged with Compromising Border Security. They also referred to it sometimes as breaching the wall. The Inquisition stood up and argued for some time how I was guilty as charged. He recounted the story of how I not only climbed over the wall but also brought a half a dozen heathens with me in a kind of zombie insurrection. He said my behavior had been so heinous they didn't even have a law against it and because of me they would have to write a new one. Not in their darkest imagination could they imagine committing such an heinous act.

I whispered in the ear of my luscious lawyer, asking if I could borrow her pen. She slid it towards me in a dismissive

manner as though she were slightly annoyed by my request. I thought she didn't need to be so brusque about it. She appeared riveted by what the inquisitor was saying. Personally, I didn't think his blathering was very interesting. He'd already made his point a while ago. Like most people who enjoy hearing the sound of their own voice he kept talking even after he'd run out of things to say. The distinction I wanted to make existed in the terminology he employed. I wrote the word zombie on a scratch pad of real paper and then put a big X through it because some words simply must come under erasure, a notion I always considered pretentious if not downright foolish, and drew an arrow pointing to the word ghoul instead. They hadn't been zombies; they were ghouls. A zombie is a creature whose mind has been taken over by a pernicious influence deadening the power of logic and reasoning and usurping the power to think independently. A ghoul is a poor unfortunate who life has worn down through overexposure to toxins or radioactivity. The distinction might appear to be slight, like the difference between stubborn indifference and callous disregard, but since we'd all taken an oath to tell the truth I thought it might be important.

About halfway through the morning session a darling young woman joined us at the defense table, seated to my left so I was sandwiched between two gorgeous women. Oftentimes my imagination

competed with my grasp on reality. Sometimes my thoughts became harnessed to my desires and were dragged helplessly into view for the whole world to see. Her taut belly stretched flat allowing her breasts to appear ampler, though either girl might easily fill a large champagne glass. Brunette hair and green eyes and one would assume tight skin covering her entire body. She yearned through her skin for me to like her. I swelled my pair in return and we were soon fast friends.

Joan Dark betrayed no notice of her darling little minion, this stalwart younger sister. I thought between them they must know everything there is to know in the world. When the woman approached the bench the girl leapt into action propping an easel and a pie chart meant to represent my varying proportions of humanness. I've never been very good with numbers let alone percentages. The generous slice of positive green helped me to feel better about my body image. The yellow portion allotted to benign mutation I felt degrading and disconcerting. I didn't know how to feel about the red sliver representing my tail and talons. My tail wasn't a bad little appendage once you got to know her. At times perhaps a tad mischievous. Tell me who doesn't like a girl whose enthusiasm sometimes outweighs her discretion.

Displaying her charts and graphs, Little Sister convinced the judge I was human enough to merit a trial. I asked Joan Dark

whether being found predominantly non-human and hence ineligible for a hearing might not provide a more desirable outcome since we could avoid the rest of these court proceedings entirely. She responded by explaining to me how without human status I would have no human rights and hence become subject to summary slaughter as an unclean beast.

Normally I would have questioned how good a deal it was to be classified as human. My experience with death and resurrection had not significantly altered or improved my thinking on the subject. For as much as I may have felt the cold fog of nihilism seeping into my bones on a nightly basis, when put to the question, my tortured body stretched onto my tippy-toes, I would instinctually recant and cling to life.

In the moment those proceedings stood stark and clear, the overly bright lighting, the stiff-backed chairs, the carpeting covering the floor looked new made, and I wondered at the sight of it, how they had managed to resurrect the long lost art for the sole purpose of padding these proceedings. Maybe I was just tripping as usual.

First they examined the guards on watch the day of my precipitant arrival when I descended by accident on the petite charmer dressed in daffodils. My attitude and behavior towards the urchin changed soon after she took the stand to give her testimony.

Her profusion of blonde curls her mother I suppose had brought under the rule of law in back and hung loosely in front, curls more subdued with the same air of natural beauty. Her clear blue eyes and noble nose and lips conveyed cheerful innocence. She wore a blousy yellow sun dress with a soft cloth belt drawn tightly around her waist. Her legs were bare and her feet strapped into tiny leather sandals. She approached the witness stand aware a whole roomful of adults was watching her until she reached the three steps and cut loose those self-conscious chains restricting her movement and bounded up into the witness chair and positioned herself on knobby knees to make up for what she lacked in height.

The Sargent at Arms maneuvered her chair so the child witness could lean her elbows on the ledge of the witness box. A murmur of approbation arose at the maturity and self-possession of the pint-sized actress in this her first leading role.

The prosecution asked her to state her name for the sake of the record and for the record her name was Anastasia, an awfully long moniker I thought for labelling such a tiny bundle. To ease the burden of pronunciation for such a young tongue, Staci for short, or Anna, depending on the time of year. In order to paint me as a monster, the inquisitor led her down a path through her memory strewn with green stemmed yellow daisies. The prosecution lingered with due delicacy. The little chirrup rounded her

shoulders and turned her chin touching each in a most absurd simulacrum of modesty. She had no real idea of modesty because she possessed no firsthand knowledge of shame. Bathed in innocence what use did this babe of nature understand about outmoded notions like guilt and shame? She must have learned that coquette's twist of the head from observing some older girl.

The inquisitor desired to know did this field sprite have a clear memory of her brief and shocking encounter with the accused, meaning me. She resembled the teeth of the lion dancing in a field on a blousy summer's day as in the affirmative she vigorously shook her gorgeous locks. The inquisitor gently reminded the waif to express her answers aloud so the tribunal could hear, and her answer could be written down for the record.

"What, if anything, did the intruder say to you?"

"She called on God," the child answered.

A shock thrilled through me like an electric charge in response to this lie.

"She called out to God?" The inquisitor asked, seeming genuinely curious concerning her answer.

"I said no such thing. I would never say any such a thing," I blurted out in the otherwise silent courtroom.

A vigorous pounding of the gavel immediately met my outburst and the jimmer-jammer engendered from the spectators.

"You did so," the little teapot tempest gravely whispered beneath the banging gavel's clamor. She drew back and crossed her arms across her flat chest in a remarkable display of defiance. She flipped her blonde locks and glared not angrily, more on the verge of tears at having been confounded on a point of fact she felt so sure of pertaining to the truth.

Her defiant posture subsided into a mischievous grin of stubbornness and I believed the affair digressing towards a termination when unexpectedly her eyes fixed their gaze on mine and impudence flared into fiery arrogance before breaking away and turning with a benign and innocent appeal towards the rectitude of the presiding judges.

An indignation of the 'how dare you' variety swelled in my lungs with hot air I just as quickly expostulated in a single puff of ineffectual breath, my moment of self-doubt not at all supportive of haughty grandeur as the sand gave way beneath the weight of a suspicion her accusation might after all be accurate. In a moment of distress had I in fact importuned a deity whose existence I had over the course of many years consistently denied? If so. then social conditioning stood to blame.

I never used to swear. In the whore house where I grew up the girls and women would sometimes tease me concerning the reticence of my diction. It wasn't until under contract when I

went to work at Club Abattoir and there took to swearing like a swan in a soggy bottom. For a brief epoch I found something comforting in swear words, a crutch to aid my preternatural mind and sluggish tongue in their search for not any old word but on the contrary only the right word for conveying a proper picture of the images pictured forth in my mind's eye. In a brothel, in that meat market slaughterhouse, I learned the nomenclature necessary for representing which part went where, and how. The why fore I learned never to question. This noun robustly verbing euphemisms. For vividness nothing surpassed the medical Greek and Latin.

I had no self-awareness as to the lurid depths my vocabulary had sunk until my best friends performed a kind of intervention. I might almost say exorcism if I were more superstitiously inclined, to purge my word hoard of these egregious samples from anatomy texts coupled with the Teutonic verb 'to strike'. A chasm of propriety opened before me, and thoroughly chastened and subdued I resolved forever in the future to cleanse my mode of expression and no longer lean on mean and vulgar means for making myself understood.

So when I dropped an F-bomb right there in court no one experienced more shock and awe than I. In a trice the panic wave swept through my body unhinging me in my joints and muscles, and gasping for breath, I felt grateful to be sitting down so my

knees wouldn't tremble beneath the burden of standing, and I clasped my hands together interlacing the fingers as a buttress against the ague struggling to escape. I hid my trembling fingers under the table where only I could see them, and they weren't a bother really because they gave my averted gaze a point of focus hiding how I was powerless to raise my eyes. Unhinged by a child in front of a courtroom full of judgmental adults. Suddenly I didn't want to be there anymore.

I mustered inside the brio of a Victorian woman of means in making my apology:

"I'm terribly sorry for having used such egregious language. I cannot imagine what came over me. I've been under a tremendous strain recently, you see, and haven't been quite myself. If this child says I said I made the remark, then I'm sure I must've. It's just that it's so very much unlike me. I'm not a true believer, and so it doesn't make any sense, my importuning a deity whose existence I deny. I'm very tired now. Do you suppose we might stop awhile so that I might rest? Again, I'm very sorry for having cursed."

I leapt to my feet and fled up the aisle towards the public exit. Someone among the spectators gasped, in my opinion a bit of unnecessary histrionics. Two jean clad deputies stood side by side before the doors barring my escape. The alpha female of the pair raised her hand bringing my flight to halt. If I'd wanted

to I could have bitten off her hand. Granted I would've had to come at it from the side attacking at the wrist. One good chomp like into a drumstick. I could've. I just didn't want to. I stood there head bowed, visibly trembling from anger and shame. Beatty the Bailiff looked around me to the judges in search of a determination.

"The court will now take a recess. Counselor, see to the needs of your client first, and then see me in my chambers to apprise me of her ability to continue today."

My beautiful public defendant arrived at my side directly and I surmised she must have had her back to the judge when she delivered her edict.

From the witness chair the little witness asked the judge, "Why is it crying?"

To which, I'm sure, the judge replied with an answer both sensible and humane, though I couldn't hear the words. Then I was aware of a supportive hand gently rubbing my back, and that was it. Kindness was the last straw.

"I'm sorry," I said yet again, and overwhelmed by a sense of having let everyone down, but her most of all, my resolve disintegrated and my face sprang several leaks. I hate crying. Tears and snot running down your chin. It's disgusting.

A moment before the deputies would have tackled me to the threadbare carpeting and hog tied me with plastic twist ties if

I'd tried to leave the courtroom. Now they were models of solicitude as they propped open the swinging wooden double doors and extended leather gloved hands to guide my lawyer and me through the portal with no touching.

"Let's go outside and get some fresh air. How's that sound? Okay?"

"Yes, that sounds good," I nodded, breathing deeply to collect my composure along with the tatters of my self-respect.

We stepped outside where the air had already begun to shed the mid-morning cool and draw forth the warmth of noon. My bailiff steered me towards a clump of shrubbery hiding a water fountain constructed of shale rock with a stainless-steel bowl presided over by a metal spigot which to my astonishment spouted forth an arch of crystalline blue water. I took full advantage of such a rare opportunity and slurped and quaffed until my tummy ached from the tiny glacier forming in my gut.

"Don't make yourself ill," she said, watching me inhale the water.

I stood with both palms resting on the fountain and elbows locked as I gasped for breath.

"Do you realize how many wastrels there are on the wasteland who would kill for a water supply this clean?"

"We have a decent supply of clean drinking water here, as much as you can drink, but take it slowly. You can have as much as you want. Just go easy. Don't make yourself ill."

Heedless of her admonition I bent to the source once more and gulped and gulped and drank and slaked and then a voice inside my head told me I was done and I had to force myself to stop and stand upright. I wiped my lips with the back of my forearm and somehow gathered what broken shards of courage I could to raise my eyes and peer into the soul of my interlocutress. I discerned on impact that merry intelligence of hers whose only real interest rested on the facts of the case at hand. She was smarter than me in very specific way and I was okay with that because I like and respect smart people and tend to listen to them when they give me advice. Her personal opinion was the same as her public opinion and had been solidified the moment she decided to take my case before the high tribunal.

"I'm sorry I freaked out on you back there. I just couldn't take it anymore, those people talking about me in such a personal way right in front of me as though I wasn't sitting there. Then the testimony of that little brat. I didn't mean to call her a liar but I swear to God I don't remember saying what she says I said. I remember being surprised as hell at finding a little kid on my path at that particular moment. With those

vicious creatures on my tail I didn't hesitate to pick her up and take her with me."

"The fact you did that has impressed the judges in a favorable way," she said, her enigmatic smile firm on her face.

"I couldn't very well have left her there. Maybe I should have... no, that's wrong. I didn't mean it. I was joking. I did the right thing by saving her."

"The fact you blurted out God's name doesn't work against you, actually, and you're concern for the little girl's life speaks highly in your favor. You immediately took a stranger's welfare into consideration. You didn't have to stop and pick her up. You didn't have to save her. But you did, and without hesitation. Without thinking, instinctively, you chose a very human course of action, a very humane thing to do."

It's a rare good feeling when you make eye contact with a truly honest and decent person. You're never sorry for it afterwards. The pure light of her righteous intellect poured into me until I was full and couldn't take anymore and I had to avert my eyes. In my embarrassment I bent to take another sip of water because I couldn't think of anything else to do but she was right about drinking my fill. Too much of a good thing all the way around.

"I don't know how much more of this I can take."

"I can talk to the judge. You don't have to be present, necessarily. Facing your accusers is thought of as a right you have. But if it's creating emotional strain you can wave that right and fill out a deposition and submit it for the court's scrutiny instead."

"Let's do it that way instead, then. I really don't want to have to go back in there. I've had enough of people. I need to recharge my battery."

"You know, other than your panic attack issues, the hearing is going very much in your favor. The case is on your side now. We've established you're human enough. That's a major victory for us. And the little girl's testimony is in your favor. But you need to explain about the bomb you were carrying."

We'd been standing there talking over the drinking fountain. We walked away down the leaf strewn path together. I sensed she wanted to watch my face as I talked.

"They lied to me about you people. They called you zombies. I had no idea what to expect. Who knows what people mean nowadays by words like ghoul or zombie. You folks are obviously neither one of those. You're clean water creatures. In coming here, I wasn't really intent on carrying out their orders. I mean, they sent along an escort to shoot me if I deviated from the plan. I reached your walls as much to escape him as anything else. I never intended to do any humans any harm."

She gently grasped my arm as she spoke to better communicate the importance of what she was saying.

"When you make your deposition tell the judges exactly what you just told me. Explain to them everything so they get a clearer understanding of your circumstances and your motivation."

"I can do that, and I don't even need anyone to write it down for me. I can write it down myself. That will actually be a lot easier for me. Better than having to explain myself in front of all those people staring at me like that. Like I'm some kind of freak."

"It's surprising to hear you tale that way about yourself. You come across to everybody as a lot more self-confident."

"My confidence comes and goes. I mean, it really comes, and then it really goes. My self-confidence comes rushing in like the tide, full of boiling fury and strength, and I feel like I can conquer the world. But when the tide goes rushing out, it drains away my strength and courage and leaves me stranded, and it happens just as fast."

"Saving that little girl the way you did was courageous. I don't care what anybody says about you, you have goodness in you."

"I don't understand why I have to experience life in such ridiculous highs and lows. I wish my reactions could be

somewhere more in the middle. I wish I could stay calmer in stressful situations, like I see you do."

I could tell she rejected my compliment as inadmissible. "What do you need to do now?"

"I want to go see the power station I was sent here to blow up. I want to see the reality of it up close. I want to pat the building itself."

"We're all solar powered here," my lawyer informed me. "There is no central power source. Each building has its own power source, its own panels. So I'm not sure what you mean."

"That thing there," I said, pointing like a little kid into the distance. "That big round building, the shiny one."

"That's the library you're pointing at."

My index finger dropped to my side from the sheer weight of incredulity.

"The library? Seriously? Oh this I have to see. Can we? I mean, may we?"

"Sure, if that's what you really want to do. We can check out the library if you like. I have to report to the judge's chambers eventually, but we have time to walk there first. C'mon. I'll show you the way. It's not far."

As we strolled along the leaf strewn paths and empty streets I began describing to her my life in its former incarnation going all the way back to my love for Rachel Cozy. I

thought those feelings were long since dead and buried. I'd spent so many years trying to assuage that pain. Tracking her down and seeing her again for the sake of closure had done a lot in terms of getting my head on straight and coming to terms with the part by facing up to it and realizing it was over and finished forever. The girl I had fallen in love with although she yet lived, in a very real sense no longer existed, and just because the sex had also been great didn't make the love any less real or meaningful. I still loved her, but the her I loved was a memory in my head, a ghost who no longer existed in corporeal form, and the cruel realization emerged between us time and time again: as a couple we were incompatible. She was an inherently dishonest person incapable of fidelity, and I was emotionally remote and a commitmentphobe. Our passion never would have settled comfortably into friendship. We were a raging torrent or nothing at all, and after a while an overwhelming sense of futility set in, and we tore apart and went our separate ways.

I thought I'd managed to quell those bad feelings but stirred up a perfect storm of recent emotions and specific romantic pain opened up like a sink hole inside of me and drew down with a force leaving a gaping hole where I thought my emotional footing had long ago solidified. That old pain, that old bad feeling, that loss. I didn't want it anymore because

then it lead to reflecting on how empty and lonely my life had been subsequently. How withdrawn I'd become and how that one relationship had soured me on the prospect of intimacy. I searched for love elsewhere. I gave it the old college try. Sleeping around left me feeling more emotionally vacuous than when I started. I gave up looking at an age when most people were marrying and just getting started. Instead of commitment I chose drugs and alcohol. I was lucky to live through that period. Not everybody I used to get high with survived. Then I met Nadezhda, but as they say, that is a whole 'nother story.

The geodesic dome had steps in front we walked up to enter into the foyer. I didn't much care for the futuristic façade of the building, dated already. The grand interior space presented a different and far more pleasing aspect. The bookshelves were constructed of oak and surround you as you walked in and rose towards the ceiling like the walls of some medieval castle and the dust motes swirling in great swaths of sunlight swirling like smoke from a sensor and a stray pigeon flapped its wings as it struggled to ascend practically straight up to the open skylight and shedding a single feather in token of its departure. A very young woman, I thought, to be in charge of such a large collection of valuable books strode to the center of this cavernous room and peered skyward, her gentle features moping both in disapprobation of the winged intruder now

departed and the strain of casting her gaze straight up to the sky. This moodiness drew taught her exquisite mouth and full red lips. Abundant strawberry blonde hair curled about her alabaster skin and framed her eyes sparkling green even at a distance. Her lips parted and her mouth curled into a smile radiating strong health and a pleasant demeanor. Without realizing I was watching her she acted the sweetest pantomime of anger, forming a fist and brandishing it skyward at the trespasser who had fled no further than the wooden boarder of the open skylight. Oh that such succulent gladness might someday chide me! Her fist dissolved into a single wagging finger. I cranked my neck to catch sight of the object of her gentle remonstrance, his evil red eyes, jutting beak, bobbing white head, the strutting princex.

My fixed stare must have stirred a presentment alerting her to the fact she was not alone. She drew down her gaze to confront my lawyer and me with that simple and angelic smile and a slight shudder and blush at having been caught in the act of her comical remonstrance. My ruined heart stirred with new life.

The young librarian and the lawyer didn't know each other as far as I could tell. They betrayed no outward acknowledgements in my presence. I didn't know if she remained in bounds according to the three years' difference measuring stick in vogue with society at the time. I do know that I dug

that sheer green velvet mini dress and sleek white stockings and black buckled leather shoes. Without an ounce of encouragement I waved to the marvel among the stacks and in reply she raised her soft hand and curled her slender fingers and pink and white unpainted nails as I watched the uncertainty cross her face and the gentle hand fall gracefully and those heart shaped lips wavered with uncertainty at the wild eyed creature accosting her who memory labelled a stranger. She didn't flinch exactly as she turned away, more demurred, heading back to the circulation desk and bearing a countenance without rancor; on the contrary, she an expression sweet and modest after that disturbing flash of non-recognition.

Hands on hips I surveyed the vast interior of this capacious library interior, marveling at the sheer number of volumes arranged along those massive shelves. Never before in my life had I felt more at ease, as though after years of fruitless searching I had finally found a home.

"What do you think?" The lawyer whispered in my ear in a hushed and reverential tone. I glanced over, achieving a sort of sideways eye contact.

"It's beautiful," I said, instinctively lowering my own tone in that somber and hallowed environment. "I've never seen so many nice books so wonderfully preserved. Look at them all.

Think how long they must have been sitting here just waiting for someone to come along and pull one from the shelf."

The lawyer slid her arm around my waist and I realized by the mounting pressure against the small of my back her intention of guiding me towards taking a seat at the nearest in a long row of stolid wooden study tables. She placed her leather briefcase before me and rummaged quickly finding a pencil. She handed it to me and I marveled at the quality of this writing implement. For the first time I shuddered to think how close I had come to destroying the centerpiece of a culture who valued knowledge and learning to the extent they made a point of manufacturing pencils and real paper.

"Why don't you sit here for a spell and write out your deposition for the judge. Take your time and don't rush. Keep it simple. Put it in your own words. Tell them your story. Let them know the truth about your whole situation. The way you told me. I'm going to leave you here and go back to the courthouse and have my meeting with the judge. You'll be alright if I leave you alone here? You won't be nervous or afraid?"

"No, not here," I said, blushing in response to her solicitude. "Not in this place. It's nice here. I'll be fine. I couldn't possibly be any more comfortable right now. Maybe after I finish writing my deposition I'll have time to read a book."

"You certainly have enough to choose from in this place," The Lawyer remarked, her shoulders sagging slightly. "I'll swing back by later and pick you up. You'll be okay in the meantime? It might be a couple of hours."

"I'll be fine. Perfectly content. I could stay in this room forever."

After the lawyer had gone Nadezhda said, "She nice lady is. Her I like."

"She is nice. Smart, too. Someone you can trust," Hater said.

"I agree. I like her, too," I said, in a voice just that much too loud.

Along the circulation desk heads rose from their somber work in response to the sound of my voice. Only the notice of one of the heads mattered the least to me. I remained still as a predator waiting for the sound vibrations to dissipate. I stole one more glance at my cherished new love, the Librarian, before picking up the lawyer's pencil and commencing to scribble my twisted tale.

By the time the Lawyer came back round to collect me I had long since finished writing my deposition detailing how my understanding had evolved on the issue of blowing up zombies, how it had never been my intention to hurt normal, healthy human beings, and if I'd had my druthers, I never would have

approached their fair city in the first place. Although, having lived among their charming inhabitants for a fortnight, I had to amend that last part, begging (in a logical sense) the court's indulgence for my earlier misapprehensions and transgressions and asking for permission to stay on as a newly anointed citizen indefinitely.

I was reading a passage by Grossman about Stalingrad, another famous city under siege, when the Lawyer's slick grey slacks swished up next to my elbow and disturbed my concentration.

"Ready to go?" She demanded, in that bizarre, professional way of hers. I handed her my written homework.

"Yes, I'm good," I said, setting down the tome occupying my attention for the previous hour and rising to join my comrade in the struggle.

"Do you want to check that out and take it with you?" The Lawyer kindly suggested.

"Do you suppose they'd let me? I don't have any collateral."

"I'm sure something can be arranged. Bring it up to the counter and let's see what we can do."

I followed her advice on book borrowing as I followed her advice now on everything, both publicly and privately, for she had yet to advise me amiss. I found myself leading the way

seeing as it was my book to be borrowed. If the Angel Librarian behind the counter took notice of my mutant appearance she betrayed no token of repulsion while she helped me fill in the application card, nothing more than a formality. The Lawyer sensibly suggested I provide her street address as my place of residence. They didn't have a working computer for this annex so they kept track of information on small rectangular cards, the old fashioned way.

"How did your meeting go with the judge?" I asked, while the Blonde Book Angel scratched her marks on my application as well and used a darling little hand press to manufacture my plastic library card.

"We'll talk about it later," Lawyer Lady said, with a wink and a wry smile.

I tried not to reveal to the Blessed Virgin of the Library the full extent of my pearly fangs, yet who could help but smile in return for such purity, grace, and charm. I bowed and thanked her. She assured me with her adolescent good will that the entire operation had been, as she put it, "No problem."

Oh beshrew my carrion heart, Gentle Spirit, if ever I should do you wrong when I should always endeavor to do what was right in protecting and preserving such gorgeous innocence.

The Lady Lawyer led the way and I trotted faithfully along like some slightly more agile Quasimodo. We were out the doors

and a fair distance down the deserted street before she gave me the full report concerning her visit with the judge. According to her the court had decided not to hold my anxious outburst against me. I was incredulous about this information because if I had been in a courtroom where The Powers That Be were presiding and I had perpetrated such an outburst the armed guards would have thrown me to the floor and clapped me in irons. My council maintained to me the judges favored leniency in regards to the charge of wall-breeching. I took a little time to rest up and more fully recuperate.

"In the meantime," I ventured, "do I still get to stay with you?"

"Yes, for the time being you can stay at my place."

For the time being. I hung my head and promptly tripped and stumbled over a crack in the sidewalk.

"That's a nice library you folks have back there."

"I'm sure you can visit it whenever time permits."

"It'd probably be better if I stayed away from it," I said. "Nice buildings like that have a tendency to catch fire and burn to the ground whenever I'm around."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked, stepping into my path and pressing her hand against my should, demanding I stop walking to answer her question.

I glanced down at her hand, then up into her face. A wry smile twisted my lips. She withdrew her hand.

"What I mean is that I'm a great fan of literature and so I've seen some nice collections. Mostly in war zones, though. It seems like just as soon as I located some beautifully preserved old archive war and fire and pestilence would sweep through the land and wipe it away while I still held a volume in my hand. I'm not saying it was my fault. I mean, I never struck the match. Don't even joke about it. I'm a bona fide bibliophile. I love books and would never harm one for any reason. It was a dark bit of self-recrimination. A dark joke. You know what Joseph Stalin said about dark humor: it's like food: some people get it, and some people don't. I happened to be standing nearby a time or two when some really beautiful collections were destroyed. Not a cool experience either time. I'm sure nothing bad will happen here. In fact, I'd be willing to donate my time to make sure it doesn't."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to act the way I did just now. It was the way you said it sounded strange."

"I didn't mean to alarm. Like I said, bad joke. C'mon. Let's go back to your place and break something expensive. Look at you. I'm joking again. Jeez, you're so uptight, counselor. You gotta learn to relax a little. By the way, where do you keep the stick matches? See? You're smiling. That's better."

"You're scaring me."

"I have that effect on people."

Later in the evening I bed down on the public defender's lilly pad where I should have luxuriated in soft comfort and fallen deep asleep. Instead I tossed and turned finding no comfort whatsoever. Looking to lighten the load by whatever means possible I slipped the silk negligee over my head and flung it away. At first I didn't know what mischief my tail was up to. It was like having your panties removed by the phallus of a total stranger. I perched on hands and knees and stretched, arched the strange stiffness from my naked limbs. I shook my gory locks howling to the incandescent moon. I was out the door and hallway and up the street before I realized some demon force had possessed my spirit, brain, and heart. I was a willing participant in my own ravishment and I relished the pleasure.

The sleeping village knew of my movements through the shadows only in their uneasy dreams. Virgins clad in soft white cotton or bare silk drew in my sin and pushed away this lascivious tongue awaking to grapple with their own moist fingers. The neighborhood hounds didn't dare raise a howl. At the most they groveled and whimpered. The library loomed into view wearing the full silver moon like a halo and I leapt upon the façade and clambered to the uppermost height of its stark battlements. If only those hoary judges could see me now perched

in a defensive posture, a pendulous creature guarding against any possible evil intruder. I could smell their putrescence in the warm wind blowing from beyond the walls and snarled and gnashed my teeth. From the surrounding hilltops coyotes howled in protest at an unclean beast usurping their position as night sentinels. I howled in rebuke and that furry pack fell silent, humbled and shamed in submission. Female, athletic, animal, wielding a dragon's sharp tale, I slunk about that haunted perch and satisfied no false intruder threatened those holy environs I kept to the open portal and gazed within upon that vision of angelic beauty. Ensconced at that dizzying height I breathed in her strawberry fragrance and rolled away to lie on my back and revel in that heady bouquet emanating from her flesh. I snatched a nearby pigeon and sunk my ravenous teeth into its neck severing the head I spat away and drank the blood slaking my thirst for innocence.

I tossed away the empty carcass and languishing in the glare of moonlit madness did my most the best I could to ease my breathing and quell the beating of my sick and lonely heart.

Warm gusts of air blew streaming across my naked flesh invigorating my senses and enlivening my sense of urgency regarding my new job watching over the sleeping settlement. As gargoyles go I emerged in the moonlight as an elite demon catcher. To be prepared come what may I took advantage of a lull

in the action to give myself a good tongue bath. Even my recalcitrant tail submitted to a good lashing like a tiger cub to the ministrations of a conscientious mother tongue. I liked myself clean and sat still allowing the restless air to dry me. I reflected on how lucky I was to have failed in my primary mission and shuddered to think what success might have meant. I couldn't help but wonder at the callousness and cruelty driving powerful men to attack a building because they perceived a threat where none existed; or perhaps they were correct in seeing knowledge itself as their enemy. Either they saw this obelisk as a power station inimical to their power base, or they knew all along this library stood in opposition to lies and the Prince of Liars, the CEO of the Dark Matter Corporation. They probably didn't care so long as a bomb went off somewhere inside these settlement walls. Destruction of any kind would represent a blow against their antithesis. Except that how anyone could misconstrue these gentle and erudite people as a threat lay beyond my poor powers to reason.

My eye caught motion like that of an insect flitting about against the backdrop of the wall next to me. My head bobbed as I attempted to track the insignificant creature who nevertheless nature had endowed with such an incredible and energetic glow. I was even bemused when the unidentified little fellow left the wall and came to rest perched upon my left breast just above my

heart. In an instant I recognized the red dot resembled no living creature in my memory bank. The red dot represented the end point for a beam of light. I looked up to identify the source but found nothing near nor far other than the empty darkness enveloping the landscape. I tumbled over backwards, and I fell a certain distance, landing on my feet and hiding myself behind the crenellations in the awkward architecture.

From my hiding place I observed the devil dot prancing about and leaping from one flat surface to another in search of its soft target now cowering in the shadows beyond its line of sight. Out there somewhere beyond the city walls crouched an enemy to these moral and decent denizens generally and to me very personally. Only the seneschal carried a weapon that accurate and deadly, the red beam originating from the concentrated hatred in his heart. He could have killed me if he'd wanted to. He'd held me dead in his sights. He'd watched his red dot do its dance of death wiggling and jiggling the beam with his ice-cold grip. He could have squeezed the trigger at any time, if that had been his desire. Instead he had waved hello. Peekaboo. I see you.

I sat with my naked arse pressed against the cold concrete and tried to imagine the mode or reasoning leading him to spare my life at this point. I couldn't conjure a lie delusional enough to convince myself he had acted out of any sense of

affection or nostalgia. I could only picture him contemplating my existence as a complicated and intriguing professional challenge whose intriguing possibilities had not yet been exhausted. Then too the mission hadn't been completed. No big explosion. No mushroom cloud. For all he knew I might've been in the process of planting the bomb this very evening. He may have been merely alerting me to his presence. Reminding me he was out there and that we were on the same team ostensibly. He must have also reflected on the possibility I'd gone native and aborted the mission entirely. My appearance on the battlements resembled the agreed upon plan. My nakedness notwithstanding. My subsequent behavior must have raised in his mind the need for at least a point of clarification.

Hey you crazy broad, what are you waiting for?

This night I also sprouted my wings. I was aware of a sudden tension, an added weight, not a bad feeling by any means, and with a flutter I somehow knew what they were and what they were for without ever seeing them. Kind of like the moment you realized you could orgasm, or did orgasm. It was like you could do it all along and suddenly you were a champ. Later on I would find a mirror and study them at length in the manner of that boy Narcissus. At first though I simply wore them with an innate understanding about their size. They may have been small at first, to be sure, and they lacked vigor to lift me aloft, but

somehow I knew that with time they would grow, and fully elongated and articulated they would exert enough torque and velocity to propel me airborne. I knew I could fly in the same manner as you realize you possess the gear to gestate a body inside your womb, knowledge terrifying and exhilarating.

In the immediate, I kept along the parapet to conceal my precious body from the line of sight belonging to my colleague the sniper. He and The Powers That Be would both have to be disappointed because I wasn't about to murder any of those gentle good people asleep in the settlement. If I planned to kill anyone it would be one of those evil demons with greed festering in their hearts back at the citadel.

I made my way inchmeal around the parapet's periphery and vaulted the crenellations on the far side away from my lethal guardian and my two newest companions stretched forth into the night and flapped excitedly one might almost say frantically at the prospect of performing their fair share by adding to the buoyancy in open defiance to the gravity weighing me down and dragging me earthward when from on high I leapt and descended thence. We fell straight down and I landed non too gently on my feet. I paused, and I'm sorry, but I waited until those two white feathered wings of mine settled down from all the excitement and folded away into a tucked position. There was just no way they possessed enough strength yet to keep my full

weight airborne. I worried I might wreck them permanently if I radically overtaxed them after their maiden flight. An ague shuddered through me at the thought of those gentle joints and sloping bones snapping backwards under the strain of too heavy a load. I paused, and waited for them to settle down. I appreciated their sense of urgency, felt it myself as a wholly new sensation. Soon, my darlings, soon. But let's wait awhile till you've grown stronger. You will gain strength. Patience. Our time for flight will come. In the meantime you have to learn the voice you hear is the one in charge, and that would be me. Fair but firm, Hater assented, and Nadezhda agreed. Fair but firm.

On the way back to the Lawyer's flat I eschewed the shadow's anonymity and relative safety in favor of the delicious moonlight spilling over my naked body where I walked down the middle of the street. My lascivious tale swung wantonly swishing through the thick and warm night air. My naked buttocks flexed firmly smooth each time I strode a step. My breasts? Oh my bosoms. What can I say about them that hasn't already been said? Were my nipples erect for this brazen midnight exhibition? Of course they were. Not like pencil erasers. More the whole nipple arose like the peak of a snow capped volcano, the sensitive flesh coaxed, swollen, and drawn upwards by the gravity of the evening star, and with each jouncing steps my new wings unfurled

their delicate majesty fulfilled by the buoyancy of the warm evening air. At first they felt satisfied channeling the streams of breeze beneath them as though allowing a kind of virgin dew to dry. Oh my reckless extremities, we must have been a sight to ponder that first night when my feet skipped a step or two and glided in maiden satisfaction.

The next day I impressed upon the counselor the importance of my finding new clothes considering I had entered the phase in the life of every young gargoyle when certain changes take place and her body begins to grow and mature in exciting and mysterious new ways. For those of you who remember a first time you ever drank pigeon blood and soon after sprouted wings I'm sure I don't have to tell you it can be a difficult transitional period punctuated by strange and exciting new emotions and feelings. At some point you might find yourself tempted to act on these new feelings. My advice would be don't do it. Don't even go there. I'm not going to explain why because when it comes to your new body and the things it can do total ignorance is your best friend. If I were to tell you how I spread my wings and flew you'd only be tempted to try it yourself, and we all know where free flying leads to, straight to the dens of iniquity. Better not to think about it. Instead, this would be the perfect time to take up a hobby, like knitting or smoking,

something to take your mind off it, because it will only lead to trouble, and nothing is worse than trouble resulting from it.

With her ineffable sense of insight and taste the councilor returned from her little shopping excursion carrying a slick sack sporting a logo no less indicative of a return to the old high way of commerce. Personally, I found the putting on of such airs as a kind of affectation. At least I did until she handed the bag to me and I looked inside and discovered the most gorgeous black and silk cowl nestled inside. The soft and gentle folds uncoiled when I lifted the garment out and held it up at full length so my admiring glance could fully appreciate every inch. In my exuberance for the pretty gift I had leapt naked from beneath the bed clothes to stand fully exposed, au natural as the Hottentots say, under the ever watchful and perspicacious gaze of my female guardian who registered every crease and fold.

The feelings of astonishment she experienced in the full revelation of the exotic peculiarities in my anatomy registered in her expression as tears brimming without falling and lips quivering into a stoic smile in awe of my supposed bravery for undergoing such trials and persevering in my resolve to continue living. I threw the drapery over my wild demeanor and new silken wings and lascivious tale allowing the soft, translucent garment to unfold, both form fitting and concealing. Angel or Daemon, what the world deduced I could not control, so I resolved to be

a proper custodian of my own madness and guard her against the brutal incursions of those who would destroy her out of jealousy and a delight in cruelty towards an entity they could only understand vaguely as somehow a threat undermining their delusions of grandeur, their petty hollow egotism. Yes, genteel friend, I had survived much and would continue to endure more and write it all down for the sake of a more enlightened futurity.

A day or two passed, depending on whether you count sleeping or waking, before the paramilitary unit arrived at my lawyer's door. The soldiers weren't dressed in black like the big city soldiers who enforced order at Powersby's behest. The only piece of matching attire they managed to wear consisted of khaki shorts reaching only half way down the leg which I thought not nearly long enough. Otherwise they had each personalized their attire. Their footgear progressed along an evolutionary scale beginning at the simple leather thong and developing into a rubber glove for the foot with an individual slot for each toe and progressing into a ragged area occupied by several pairs of rubber and canvas shoes terminating in a very fine pair of desert boots revealing no less than wool socks neatly folded down below the calf muscle. Yet how could the ankle boot have evolved from the leather thong if the leather thong still exists.

While I tripped out on their feet my lawyer consulted with their chieftain. It was then I noticed their khaki shorts were the same except for their bulges. They ran the gamut in this respect as well, from sweet little bonobo monkey to horned oxen, with the humans somewhere in the middle. In retrospect their shirts started out the same; each had two pockets protecting their nipples, but each soldier wore his own colored undershirt or none at all and they each wore the sleeves differently, including the one guy who had torn his off turning the shirt into a vest. Come to think of it, he was the guy wearing a blue bandanna tied around his neck and sepia dark glasses. He didn't really have the physique to carry it off. To me his look appeared affected. They amounted to a ragtag collection of desert rats, and I doubted they had any Wasteland experience.

"We need to pack your belongings and go with them," The Lawyer said, gripping my arm and whispering fiercely in my ear.

"What can be the matter?"

"I don't know," the Lawyer said, scandalized. "They have a writ authorizing your immediate deportation beyond the city walls."

"What? What for! I haven't done anything."

"I don't want to talk about it. I need to see what the Captain is talking about first."

She searched the corner of my eyes for evidence, but finding nothing but bewilderment there gently lead me forward.

"A Captain?" I inquired. "I've never been tortured by a rank as high as Captain before. The actual hands on pain is usually inflicted by a Sargent or less."

"Nobody will torture you here," she said, her lips contorting into a reproachful smile. "We're civilized here. Only barbarians torture their fellow man."

"I've known groups of men laying claim to moral superiority rather stridently employ enhanced interrogation techniques on a regular basis when it suited their purposes."

"What's the difference between what you just said and torture?" She seemed to be genuinely curious.

"One is a euphemism; the other names the thing itself."

"Nobody is going to do either."

"Their one and the same."

"Let's go see what the soldiers are talking about."

We went outside and the handsome young Captain with the light brown eyes made himself know by handing me my Wasteland togs and voluminous bag. I had to think twice about the bag to realize it wasn't the one I used to carry around with me everywhere I went in the olden days. I hadn't seen any of my really old possessions since Powersby brought me back from the

infernal region and put me on active duty. This new bag appeared to be some kind of parting gift.

In a group we marched with the brown eyed man striding with purpose ahead of us in the lead. Then I came along taking a lot of little steps to keep pace and my lawyer, very much to her credit, let it be noted, who never once left my side. The rest of the clown car straggled along behind.

We arrived at the Library and the Captain engaged a couple of custodian looking guys in a conversation about me. I'm assuming. The older guy shot a look at me one time, sullen and resentful, and I thought to myself with a sigh, now what have I done. I was looking around hoping to catch sight of that sexy young librarian who I assure you actually existed and was beautiful in herself and not some pornographic type utilized for the sake of prurient interest. She aroused my prurient interest but that doesn't mean you are in any way obligated to follow my bad example. You should do as I say and not as I do, like biting the heads off pigeons. And there they all were, this many, lined up post mortem with the most probable matching head placed strategically near to its most probable corpse.

My own lawyer closed her eyes and bowed her head in response to what she read in my guilt ridden reaction. I was on the verge of denying everything but stopped on the verge of

lying because it would have meant being dishonest to her when she hadn't done a thing to me less than honest and decent.

I lowered my head and mumbled an apology. The crowd compressed its lips against me.

"Not you rabble," I said, dismissing them all with a wave of my hand. "I'm talking to her alone."

My lawyer raised her head. My goodness, that fast she was already over it. She came over to where I was standing and embraced me, pressing her lips to my forehead.

"You have to go now, and I want you to promise me one thing: you'll go peacefully. Don't hurt anybody on your way out."

The big double doors to the Library opened and three women stepped outside, Spiker, Sponge, and my beauteous muse.

I reached into the voluminous bag and retrieved my body suit and gave it a good fluff to straighten it out.

"Don't worry. I won't turn violent. I'll go peacefully, as they say. But if I'm to be thrown out into the Wasteland I need to change my clothes first."

The Lawyer started mumbling some kind of reassurance about fair and dignified treatment as I whipped off my black silk cowl and stood there voluptuous, teeming with gothic delights. My green eyes flashed. I shook my tumultuous red tinted black hair. My virgin white wings spread as I raised my claws into the air

above my head. Mammary glands defied the law of gravity and just when the angel thought she had it all figured out my lascivious tail sailed under my keel and emerged gasping for air on the other side. Both soft and hard I was glutinous to the maximus. My thighs flexed athletically. Gasps, gulps, laughter, sighs, and several ejaculations of disgust. Both old aunties covered my muse's eyes. Too late. She'd seen everything, drunk in with her eyes my raw naked gargoyle sexual splendor. They hurried her away inside the building, but it was too late. What was seen cannot be unseen. I would be back, starring in her dreams, or nightmares. In the guise of a succubus I would ravage her nightly. Struggle against her sweat stained bedclothes though she might she would never shake my image haunting her dreams. My image had entered her mind's receptacle and her eyes glazed over like a drawbridge drawn too late, sure sign of introspection. Her lips curled as her eyes shifted sideways to catch one more snapshot for later. Click.

My Lawyer did not hide her eyes either knowing later she would be called upon to write an eyewitness report. She looked me in the eyes and trying to be a good sport she said, "I can't take you anywhere."

With that wry statement she broke my spell and I retracted my flourishing stance. I stepped into my body armor and slid it

over my naked body. I picked up that slinky bit of lingerie and tried to hand it back to the counselor.

"You can't have nice things in the Wasteland," I said. If I could have stopped there it would have been a great way to end the scene, all selfless and dramatic-like. Except I hurt the Lawyers feelings.

"Oh no no!" she protested, shoving back the proffered garment. "I bought that for you, as a present, to keep."

"I'll pack it away and save it for later, maybe," I said, caving instantly. It really was a nice, expensive garment. I can't imagine who in that forlorn outpost possessed the mad skills to create such a flimsy article. I was so pleased when she insisted I keep her gift tears welled in my eyes. My nobility of spirit crumbled as I pulled the backpack onto my shoulders and the desert soldiers escorted me toward the exit gate.

"A pigeon is nothing more than a rat with wings," I said, even though I didn't completely believe my own statement. I didn't have anything against pigeons, per se; I was just trying to impress my girlfriend the Librarian. To what excess do our emotions sometimes lead us.

As I had promised to do I accepted the verdict of banishment and wore that invisible mantel binding my wrists and neck. Once again I found myself following the good Captain and

followed myself by his merry band of clowns. He lead us along certain side streets narrow and empty leading through a pueblo district in a part of town I would only see once, while making my exit.

We arrived at the Eastern most gate so seldom used the local progressives left it locked but unguarded. No one in their right mind would voluntarily exile themselves from that liberal paradise. El Capitano removed from his rear pocket a large iron skeleton key, old but solid and well oiled. The weight of such a tumble turner might be measured both in terms of ounces and responsibility. For some reason, I became mesmerized by the unlocking process. He shoved the throating into the aperture right up to the collar and pinched the bow with finger and thumb and by a complex contrivance involving gears and cylinders coaxed the interior mechanism to roll over and slide this massive iron rod to a retracted position. I found the entire operation incredibly satisfying.

One gong reverberated the length of both iron doors like an ancient bell signaling their release. He swung only one side open enough to allow me to slide through. The short pants brigade scurried into dark passage ways situated in the thick adobe walls and subsequently emerged on top of the massive walls visible once I stepped through into the scorching daylight and glanced skyward over each shoulder in turn. I turned to give the

lawyer a hug goodbye but I was too late. She remained sequestered in the shadows and waved her hand as the ponderous gate closed tight obscuring her from my sight. The smile she wore expressed not only well wishes but also belied a great relief at seeing me go. I undoubtedly represented one of the more problematic cases she'd ever been assigned.

On the outside of the wall the heat beat down mercilessly. I noted it right away. I scouted the desert sand and scrub brush faded into the background as only the second likely agent of death in the long run compared to the mob of ghouls milling about in the distance who presented a far more immediate threat. None of that diseased tribe appeared to have taken any notice of my inauspicious emergence from behind the defensive wall. The main body of the crowd remained oblivious. Several hideous creatures, detached and random, lifted their barely conscience gazes only to let them droop again when I stood still and made no sudden movements. As long as I ambled at a leisurely pace my movements wouldn't excite any interest from those living, breathing nightmares.

One of the soldiers for want of a better term perched upon the wall signaled me by clicking his tongue quietly so as to garner my attention without exciting any undue notice. I approached the wall and the most stylish young man among them who sat with his legs curled to one side held aloft a drinking

canister he dropped confident of my timely reaction. Sure enough I caught the parting gift. I examined it and weighed the implications holding the water aloft and shaking it once, twice, as a symbol of my appreciation. By his smile I gauged my beaming attestation provided more than adequate recompense.

Sliding the container into the voluminous bag I turned and paced onward pushing into the desert wasteland. Failing at my appointed mission had ironically revealed to me I'd never more clearly triumphed. Not far in the distance among those outcroppings hid my nemesis the Sure Shot. Assassin at large for Powersby. I didn't know if my imminent death would presently be my instantaneous punishment or not. I'd already been dead once and never asked anyone to bring me back alive. Facing death for the second time I found myself lacking enthusiasm for the prospect.

The sunlight shone scorching my hair and shoulders. My all terrain suit did its job deflecting most the rays and yet it was like within the suit and under the voluminous bag I carried an added burden, the conflicting success and failure I carried inside me into exile. Once again I turned away ejected from enlightened society as a dangerous and foreboding freak.

The burden of my reverses proved too much and I sought to lighten my load. I can't say I acted out of any premeditation. Intuition took charge and I followed a blissful passion to be

free, terrifically free. I slid the voluminous bag from my shoulder and let it drop to the sand. Unzipping the suit I stopped free of it that easily. The delicious high desert air flowed across my naked limbs, and a new feeling emerged from the depths of my contorted body. Those wings, my wondrous white wings spread to their full length and as though meant for the moment a stiff breeze filled them with delight and lifted me aloft and bore me high into the air. No more exotic creature had ever yearned for the sun nor cast its flickering shadow across the mottled wasteland. I was free, born aloft, majestic and aloof. I saw the sunlight reflected off his high-powered scope and felt the metallic wasp bite my breast. Firing his high-powered dart gun that son of a b---- Ranger Rude shot me right in the titty.

That rotten seneschal fired his high-powered dart rifle and the poison projectile hit the breast bone just to the inside of my right boob.

"Flap your wings, Nika. Your wings. Not your hands. Your wings. Concentrate. Focus," Hater coached.

Hard ground approached spreading out beneath me rapidly.

"I no like hard ground," Nadezhda whined. Usually I don't appreciate whining but coming from her in that dire moment I thought it sounded kind of cute.

They were correct. We were plummeting at an alarming rate. Per Hater's advice I stopped waving my hands about like a maniac and focused instead on stiffening my new wings. Whatever potion that glorified bounty hunter had dipped his wasps in felt sure enough fast acting. I was turning bleary and dopy.

"Here comes sand," I dreamily crooned and thrust out my hands like retractable landing gear. Fortunately, I had a lot of experience combining drugs with alcohol and knew how to compartmentalize my thinking while higher than a kite so I managed a soft landing but lying there supine on the desert floor I was having a difficult time rousing my extremities into further concerted action.

I blew a strong puff of air and the plume of desert dust rising beguiled my altered senses as though for the very first time the building blocks of celestial matter were revealing themselves. I'm not sure how long I lay there like that observing the minutiae of creation, the underside of cathedral like tumbleweeds; in turn a rock, a pebble, a stone; the welken arching overhead. Mr. Know-it-all appeared, balanced on one knee, ruining my reveries.

"Are you hurt?"

"No thanks to you," I muttered without raising my head from its sandy pillow.

"I'm not sure I follow you," he said.

"Than don't," I said, "cuz you're a jerk. You know something? You're a jerk, cuz you're not supposed to shoot people, because shooting people isn't nice."

"You forced me to shoot. You looked like you were trying to escape. I didn't want to shoot. You made me. By the way, when did you grow these? Are they real? They're awesome."

"Stop fingering my feathers, pervert," I slurred, struggling onto my hands and knees. "I'm not talking to you; you gun toting psychopath. That oversized popgun is just an extension of your undersized male ego."

"I have a job to do and it doesn't include allowing you to fly the coop."

"Oh how droll. How very droll."

"I don't know what that means. Can you stand up and walk? I'd rather not stay put on this particular spot. You never know when a crowd of ghouls like that one will take notice of your healthy flesh and start a stampede."

"What do you care," I asked rhetorically, struggling to my feet. That bee sting had thumped me hard, taking me out at the knees. Clocked like a boxer my brain lost contact with my wobbly legs. My poor unstable body collapsed into a heap on the sand. I laughed at my own predicament in the manner of a person emerging as stupidly high. A more sensible part of my brain understood none of this charade was funny.

"Get up, Creature, and go claim your gear. You're going to need it."

"What name did you call me?" I demanded, giggles subsiding under my snotty proboscis I wiped against my right forearm.

"Stop fooling around and go grab your gear. Put your suit on and wrap down your extremities. We need to redeploy."

"Why? So you can assassinate me away from witnesses?" I made a second slightly more successful attempt to stand up straight.

"I don't have a mandate to assassinate you," Johnny Sureshot said, stepping to my side, gripping my elbow with a steadying hand. "If I'd meant to kill you, you'd be dead by now."

I turned to him and draped my arms around his neck. "Oh honey, you say the sweetest things." He reached up and seized my wrists and pried loose my embrace.

The only observable meaning in life is propagation of the species. The only demonstrable purpose reproduction. Beyond existence the only good is pleasure. By this term I do not mean a gouty foot or rotting appendage or asphyxiation by one's own vomit. What I do mean begins with an avoidance of pain. Except for some people who like a little pain mixed with their pleasure, but that's a different story. No one in their right mind would endure pain when they might instead enjoy pleasure.

That which feels good feels the best, and since feeling and intellect are all that we have, lay on pleasure, banish pain, psychologically excruciating and unendurable. To minimize the one and maximize the other emerges as the only worthy goal of a life well lived.

Shoot a child with an assault rifle their blood splatters like gold dust onto every surface. Then you come along with a bucket and mop up the profits. New babies are born every day. Fresh meat means more money.

My father resides in hell forced to suck demon cock. They ejaculate hot lava down his throat. Tears sprout from his eyes.

I felt high and lucid.

"Do you really believe all that stuff?" I'd shocked the murder for hire guy.

"Of course not. He's just dead. A blank. A null. It's nice to know he's not out there and can't hurt me anymore. I mean my step-dad. I never knew my biological father."

I stood in the glare of the midday sun and cried. The sniper squatted on his haunches and tossed random pebbles back and forth. Not out of any sense of sympathy; more as a way of passing the time until I could manage to pull myself together.

"Let's get out of here. I hate this place," I lied, sniveling and rubbing my forearm against my nose.

I put my suit back on and gathered the volume and we set off down the dirt road and that wretched crowd of ghouls milling about outside the protective wall. For a time the sniper cradled his rifle across his forearm military style. As the morning wore on he slung the weapon over his shoulder. A few of the beasts had turned and glared at our forms in motion, but our low-key motility wasn't enough to awaken their mad desire to chase down prey.

The sun passed the noonday meridian. The thought of food passed through my mind. Just as quickly the tranquilizer high subdued the notion. At the subconscious level I knew I should be hungry. My appetite was suppressed. I wondered what the name of the drug was he had shot into me and I hankered after it in pill form. I unzipped my suit low enough to look down sideways and see the puncture wound and the trickle of dried blood.

"I can't believe you shot me."

"That was this morning, a long time ago. I think we need to move beyond that phase in our relationship."

I meant to express my incredulity, managing a very satisfying snort. He seemed taken aback by the splutter so I tried a reiteration creating a phlegm ball I had to cough up and spit out. Gross.

We arrived at a cross roads and the Sniper took me by the elbow and steered me firmly to the left. I pulled my arm away in

an unhand-me-sir fashion, but we followed the path he indicated. In the tranquilizer bubble I wandered in I became depressed from being manipulated while under the influence yet again in history of my miserable existence.

"Is this drug you shot me with going to wear off anytime soon?"

"Probably not. I'm surprised your walking under your own power, to tell you the truth. I expected to have to carry you. You'll sleep well tonight, for sure."

No sooner had he spoken than night fell. I was lying wrapped in a cozy oversized quilt staring at the fire in a dreamy sort of way a person does mesmerized by the crackling pirouette.

"Stop smiling at me," I pouted. Ashes and a thin grey drivel of smoke and a predawn pink and blue sky rose over brown and yellow rock formations. I awoke again to something red bubbling and steaming over a low crackling flame. I felt hungover until I stretched and most of the lethargy fled through my fists."

"Coffee-like is bubbling in that kettle there on the flames," my attacker said, bashful as a bridegroom the morning after his first confirmed kill.

"Real coffee?" I exclaimed, clapping my hands, feigning excitement when I knew it was no such thing. He bought my performance, poor simple creature.

"Not likely outside the Master's penthouse."

"Too bad the Master's not here. I prefer the real kind to the imitation kind. Next time I'll be sure to wake up in the penthouse."

"Fat chance of that ever happening," the Seneschal said, twisting his lips in cruel derision. "This Master doesn't have sex with freaks."

I caught his verbal punch and hauled on his arm till he felt my foot slam against his solar plexus as the world turned topsy-turvy.

"You might be surprised at what some men develop a taste for, especially rich men who've tried it all. They like it freaky the most out of anybody," I said, reaching for the cup of coffee he was proffering towards me, wiggling my hips in a wanton way. When his gaze darted away I exulted with head thrown back. Freak indeed. Please. I invented haughty disdain, mister. "Do you have anything extra I can mix with this swill?"

He reached into his backpack and put his hands on the jobber in one fell swoop. He handed me the bottle and said, "Careful. The coffee is hot. It's really hot."

"What gave it away for you," I asked. "The molten bubbles or the rising steam?"

"Both actually."

My sarcasm fell flat against his frankness and the whole pointless exchange dissolved. I took a seat on a nearby rock and holding the cup gingerly by the lip blew away the gentle steam.

He sat on the opposite side of the flames he'd stoked back to life as he sat worrying two pieces of metal together that didn't seem to fit. I sat comfortable in my own company not daring a sip yet of his infernal concoction. When I finally took a drink the taste reminded me of squeaky leather shoes and daffodils.

"How is it?" He asked, not looking up from whatever project he was working on.

"Not bad," I shrugged, then in a more affable key, "pretty good, actually, for real imitation."

"Real imitation is the best."

"Real is the best."

"You ever had real? I mean really real?"

"I got a sip once."

"A sip," the Seneschal repeated. I think he was charmed by my modest honesty.

"I was sitting in the lap of a Powersby," I said, sticking with the whole honesty thing. "It was the morning after, and he was hand feeding me breakfast. I was fairly young at the time."

"He dug a chick with wings and a tail?"

"You're killing me with your soft sexism," I said before taking another sip of my morning beverage.

"I'm just saying, a chick with a tale is pretty weird."

"Oh honey, you say the sweetest things."

"Just saying."

"You know you want me," I said. I thought I was impervious to his criticism, but what he said next caught me off guard.

"Maybe I do."

"Maybe you do?"

"Okay. Yeah, I wanna try you."

If there's anything harder to take than failure its success, worse than rejection, acceptance. Suddenly, I no longer felt comfortable.

"Going to sample my wares before assassinating me?"

"I don't have any orders to assassinate you," the Seneschal said. He had succeeded in fitting his two pieces of metal together and promptly stuffed them into his bag. "Besides, to assassinate means to kill someone important."

This guy's offhand verbal cruelty came close to breaking my confidence. "What word would you choose?"

"Eliminate. I had orders to eliminate you if you tried to run. But you're not running. You're coming along. Being cooperative. Since that's the case, my orders have changed."

"What are your orders now," I asked, masking my perturbation behind the last swig of kinda coffee.

"My orders are to bring you back alive. Protect your life along the way."

"Am I in trouble with the Master?"

"I don't know. Are you?"

"Dude, break down."

"How should I know?"

"My mission failed."

"It happens. They still must have some use for you in mind. Otherwise..."

"...otherwise?"

"You'd be dead by now. I'd have killed you already. If you'd tried to run, I would have used a bullet instead of a tranquillizer dart. But that's not the plan. They want you back, alive and in one piece. I shot you with the dart because I wasn't sure what you were doing. You've been cooperative enough since then."

"I won't run. I promise. I don't have anywhere to go."

"Now you're talking smart. Just come back with me. See what the Master has to say. He probably won't eliminate you for failing. I've failed a few times myself, and he didn't execute me. Nobody would want to work with him if that's the way he operated. No, he wants you back alive, safe and sound."

As if in violent contradiction to his last utterance a bullet careened with a twang off the rock next to where my hand was resting. We exchanged a startled look as I flopped to the ground. He recovered more proactively than I did. In an instant he had grabbed his rifle with the fancy scope attached. I crawled on my belly around the fire and curled up directly behind him. He had assumed a sitting position, with one knee bent forward and the other leg tucked underneath his butt, most apropos, I'm sure, given the available rock coverage and the logistics of the situation. Peering through the scope he surveyed the distant terrain as another shot twanged off a rock about a foot away from his face. He slumped down and took cover without hugging the dirt quite as intently as I was instinctively groveling.

"Whoever it is, they're not very good," he said, more or less thinking aloud in a professional sort of way.

"How can you tell?" I asked from my vantage point tensed in the dust.

"Because he missed, twice. Both times his shot was wide to the right. Which means his equipment is faulty. Probably old. Ancient. His sights are off. You stay here under cover. I'll sneak around and take my shot."

"Alrighty then," I said, rolling over onto my back and watching him with my gaze positioned upside down as he scooted

away. I rolled over onto my stomach and took up position pressed firmly to the ground behind the natural cover and waited, listening with my eyes.

"You stay here," said my chevalier. "I'm going to outflank them. I'll take my shot from there."

"Sounds like a plan," I said from my supine position of safety. While I felt disinclined toward the deed myself, I felt very much in favor of someone else killing for me. He was dressed like a soldier, after all, and that's what soldiers do. You couldn't very well expect someone of my delicate sensibility to fire a weapon, or even more unthinkable, risk life and limb being fired upon and possibly mangled or killed. War is all well and good, so long as someone else does the dying.

After awhile I rolled over and I lay on my back in the dirt, ankles crossed, and thrumming my fingers to enchant the time and fill the silence. For a brief moment I contemplated making my break for freedom. However, the words of the Seneschal, about his directive to shoot me if I ran took aim. As a flight risk my odds for survival dwindled. Maybe if those desert bandits taking pot shots managed to kill my surrogate in the fight first and came after me to finish the job I might spread my wings and become airborne although my chances for avoiding the kill shot would probably improve by simply running and dodging from boulder to boulder. What was the worst outcome

imaginable? I'd be shot dead? I'd been dead once before, and since I didn't really have any memory of it, I didn't fear death like a normal person. Still, the instinct for self-preservation lurked at the primordial depths underneath my cavalier exterior. What was I expected to do? Embrace death and what, give up all this? I mused, lying on my wings in the dirt.

I heard the Seneschal in a clarion clear voice shouting commands to lay down your weapons and raise your hands in the air and various other exhortations as well. I won't bother repeating here peppered as they were with the most derogatory words and phrases. Blowing a man's brains out never provides an excuse for obscenity.

Then I heard the Seneschal call my name. Without lifting my head I responded.

"Yes, Darling?"

"Get up and get over here and bring my volume with you."

I can only describe the way my soul recoiled at the imperative tone in his voice. Obediently doing as I was ordered should in no way be taken as a commentary upon my egalitarian spirit or my commitment to non-violent causes. What can I say? Dude owned a gun, and he knew how to use it. He was in the act of prolonging my life if not saving it outright, and as I've already indicated, I'm fully prepared to support the troops so long as I don't have to risk my own life and limb among them.

He stood weapon at the ready lodged against his shoulder as I trotted up, good Gal Friday, and deposited the volume at his feet before backing away from the most dangerous beasts known to the animal kingdom. He didn't need anything out of the bag. He just wanted me and his gear in one place where he could keep tabs on everything and everybody at once. Under his watchful aim crouched my old foes Flotsam and Jetsam, knees pressed in the sand and hands raised high in the air.

"Nika, if you would please go pick up their weapons and bring them back over here and store them in my volume."

His sudden rather polite and gallant change in tone charmed me as much as his manly grasp of the weaponry. Rising above petty mockery would have been the mature course of action to have taken in that situation but I failed miserably at adulthood.

"Hello, boys. Don't bother getting up on my account. Nice nose job, dude. Nice face. Excuse me while I collect these pop guns which seem to have been abandoned. Sale on used weapons: Never fired and only dropped once."

Taking charge of an ancient bolt action rifle and a sharp shooter without a scope I placed both weapons at the Seneschal's feet and backed away to stand behind him and a little to the left.

"What should we do with them?" He asked over his shoulder.

"You're asking me?" I demanded, shuffling forward and took a fistful of khaki shirt and held on as a show of solidarity as well as to steady my nerves.

Since our captives remained on their knees only a few yards away my man stopped measuring them through his scope and lowered his rifle waist high resting the butt against his abdomen.

"You're the civilian authority. You tell me."

My feet scraped the sand in search of firmer footing.

"I think we should water board them."

The Seneschal grinned broadly and turned his head toward the painted desert so I could see his profile before turning back to make his reply.

"I don't think we have enough water in the canteen for both of them."

"True. We probably shouldn't go that way anyway. Too immoral."

He turned his sniper rifle this way and that, inspecting it like a real pro, never forgetting it was locked and loaded. "We could kill them both, right here and now."

I could feel cotton mouth taking shape in my mouth. "The death penalty? I dunno. Seems kind of severe."

"Yet they tried to do the same to you just a little while ago. They tried to kill us. Now we kill them."

"As a part of the social contract you have to subsume your will to the rule of law. Preferably before tragedy strikes. That way your blood lust, your lust for revenge, gets taken away from you. The whole affair is removed to a court of law where evidence can be presented and cooler minds than the bereaved can deliberate over guilt or innocence, a group of unconcerned citizens can look at this case more objectively and come to a clear-headed decision."

"You're against the death penalty?"

"Let's face it. There hasn't been a big call for the death penalty since all the black people were sent away. They were the only ones sent to the gallows anyway. Black men primarily."

"True, but we'd be within our rights executing these two rascals. Besides, nobody practices that trial by jury nonsense any more. If in doubt, ask the Master what to do. He's the wealthiest and most powerful for a reason. He's got powerful blood in his veins. Good genes."

In a conspiratorial whisper, I asked him, "Is it true he married his sister?"

In a bit of a huff, he replied, "She's not his sister. She's his niece. It's perfectly respectable, keeping it in the family, and his wealth is hereditary, passed down from one generation to the next tax free like God intended."

"So let's assume the Master really is God's right hand man here on Earth," I could tell by his solemn head nod the Seneschal was prepared to accept the Master's divinity as a given, "they let us ask ourselves what would Master do? Or what would he have us do?"

"He'd have us kill them."

"Okay, let's pause for a second and reflect a little. Is there some way we could, oh I don't know, maybe take them back with us as prisoners? Just to make sure justice is done right."

"Either that, or we could give them five seconds to run and then shoot them both in the back. As long as there's nobody around as witnesses, that'll work."

I stroked my chin with insecure fingers, "True, but they're both white."

"That's a good point," the Seneschal conceded. "We'd better take them into custody and drag them back with us. Here, hold this. If they move, shoot 'em."

He handed me his rifle and pulling a Taser from his utility belt fired at point blank range right into the man-titties of the more sinister of our two captives. Once those devilish barbs hooked into his flesh the bad man spasmed with electricity until his eyes rolled up inside his head and he flopped over and continued lying on his back to dance a merry jig. Apparently, a governor cut the power automatically after a certain number of

volts had flowed. Otherwise, I think the Seneschal didn't possess the reserve to ease up on the amperage himself. That kind of power required a kill switch because once you started with that kind of fun it would be difficult to stop of your own volition. The Seneschal twisted the weapon this way and that flexing his hand around the grip. It had been good for him, too. You could tell. The bad man slowly abated twitching and jerking. A bubble of yellow snot snapped from his nose as an embarrassing wet spot spread in this groin area. His partner in crime turned pale and looked aghast at his fallen comrade. With arms raised he shrunk as if in anticipation, trying to make himself less of a target.

"Did you have to zap him so hard?"

"What's the point of having cool toys if you're not allowed to use them?"

The Seneschal jerked at the wires until the fish hooks embedded in the flesh tore loose.

"It'll take a few minutes to recharge. Then I'll zap the other one."

The other one cringed and dropped his arms around his waist to cradle himself in abject despair as he blubbered big tears anticipaing his turn to arrive.

"Oh, I'd say he gets the point already. Don't you, Slim Jim."

Our enhanced interrogation techniques were having their effect. Slim Jim nodded his assent vigorously and wiped a sleeve against his own leakage of bodily fluids.

"Oh okay," the Seneschal peevishly concurred. I didn't mean to disappoint him. He packed away his favorite toy and snatched his rifle out of my grasp with a strength I would have been hard pressed to resist even if I had been at the ready.

"Look in my bag and fetch a couple of twist ties. Those long white plastic threads."

As I rummaged about, his point of clarification helped me identify and retrieve the plastic wrist ties.

Dutifully, I tried to hand them over to him but he issued more orders.

"Cuff 'em. Hands behind their backs."

I'd always been a big fan theoretically of the rule of law. I always fancied myself more of an ideas person. Living in the wasteland I'd never actually seen justice. Troopers were charged to protect and serve, but that only applied to rich people, and I'd never got closer to one of them than as a slave. Granted the presence of troopers tended to reduce the incidence of general mayhem. Unruliness among the poor annoyed them into action every time.

"Effete intellectual," Hater called me.

"Oh hush," I whispered back. Then I felt sorry for hushing him. It was a knee jerk response.

"I never wanted to be a cop. That's all I'm saying. Ultimately, I come down on the side of law and order because I'm timid and physically weak, but I'm also outspoken, in need of protection."

"Don't get me wrong," Hater said. "I think you did a good job of rising above your enslavement. That part was good. But the kind of society you envision requires engagement. Sometimes you have to roll up your sleeves and because personally involved. Physically involved."

"I'd say I'm pretty involved right now," I murmured.

"Don't talk to him, Angel," my guy in activewear admonished as I fastened the twist tie around the wrists of Slim Jim, who I forced to stand up so I wouldn't have to kneel.

First I had to process the embarrassment of realizing I'd been talking to Hater out loud. Then I had to grapple with the sobriquet 'Angel'. Had he called me that because of my wings? Or was he being sexist? Because I had no delusions nor aspirations to be considered as a heavenly entity. How many Nika's could fit on the head of a pin. My wings were a genetic mutation, an aberration, at best a happy byproduct of an otherwise successful brain implant, nothing more. Hater was correct in this regard and who can you rely on if not the spirit of your dead friend

lurking underneath your brain at the molecular level? I mean, there's superstition, and then there's science. Let's not confuse the two.

We wrestled the fat boy assassin to a standing position as well and zipped his wrists together. I sort of hid behind the Seneschal as he motioned with his high-powered rifle for those reprobates to start marching.

"Where you taking us?" The junior partner pled for information. The senior partner was still shaking off the recent voltage coursing through his body. His dimpled nose glowed redder than his pale face and sunburned cheeks.

"Keep walking toward the dirt road up yonder. I'm taking you back to the Master's compound. Let him decide what's best."

"We didn't do nothing to you," Nosegay shouted. Slobber dangled from his lower lip and dangled at his chin.

The Seneschal shifted his weapon from his hip to his shoulder as he made his accusation: "You shot at us, twice!" Point made, he dropped the rifle stock and caught it in his other hand.

"We wasn't trying to kill you. We was trying to kill her! Or it. Whatever you want to call it. We was hired by the same Master you work for!"

"Not to kill her, you weren't. You were hired as a scout. An extra gun at the most. In trying to murder her, you exceeded your prerogative."

"Well said, my man," I congratulated him, patting him on the back as he walked before me.

He turned his head and flashed a big grin in profile, nodding his head vigorously to indicate how proud he was of himself for having thought of it.

We reached the dirt roadway and fell into line to begin the long march. The import of the death threat made against me left me dejected and I dropped behind several paces, drooping my head and watching my feet where I walked.

"You still with me, Nika Savage?" The Seneschal called out over his shoulder.

"Yes," I responded, abruptly lifting my gaze. Nosejob mimicked the petulance in my voice. "You better watch your step, mister, or I'll have my boyfriend shoot you!" Both those imbeciles laughed in the face of my threat.

"You really her boyfriend?" the weaker one shyly inquired.

"She's not my girlfriend," the Seneschal dryly replied.

"I'm taking her back to the Master, same as you."

"Couldn't you back me up a little?" I whined, really stung and embarrassed this time by his rejection.

"Are you saying I'm not backing you up?" he fired back, indicating with his rifle the obvious extent of his support.

"No, I guess not. You're doing fine. Thank you very much. You're doing a good job."

"The freak says you're doing fine. Sounds like mutant love to me." Nosejob spat the words in the ugliest way possible. Both he and his stupid sidekick laughed like they were the funniest two comedians alive. Their laughter incited my madness.

I broke out of line and trotted over to the side of the road and after sizing up several rocks chose a suitable projectile, a dirt clod bigger than my fist, and heaved it at Nosejob but hit Squarehead smack in the small of his back. The impact took a second to register in his brain. When the pain impulse arrived he let loose a howl and blubbered a little. He thought the Seneschal must have walloped him one because he spun around and gave him a furious 'what gives' sort of look as though the rules of war and treatment of prisoners ought to apply. In that moment I launched another salvo. I really threw like a girl this time, hard and fast and accurate. Whiney Baby caught sight of the airborne clod in his peripheral vision and flinched and ducked and the dirt clod clocked Fatboy right in the back of his head. He stumbled forward a few paces bent over and at a loss for balance. Then he straightened up and turned on me and spewed a stream of vitriolic profanity so vulgar and vile

both Hater and Nadezhda filled with indignation and rose in protest. I sort of hid behind them because I knew what they could be like once anybody stirred their dander. Even with his hands tied behind his back, Fat Man charged at me, shaking his gory locks and slobbering in anger. His partner Little Man had to jump aside to avoid being run over. In response, I did a little side step prance putting the Seneschal between my attacker and me. Fury had so taken over his mind Fat Man didn't take into consideration the Seneschal was armed until he swung the butt of his gun and caught him on the cheekbone and his legs churned right out from under him as he laid Fat Man flat. A white crease appeared in the flesh at the point of contact with the rifle butt. This crease turned bright red as the blood emerged, escaped and ran down his face. He dropped dude in his tracks, as they say. The smack down was brutal. Hijinks came to an abrupt halt.

The Seneschal brought his rifle up to his shoulder and took aim through the site even though he was standing over the guy at point blank range. Panic surged through me because I thought for sure the Seneschal was going to blow dude's brains out. I gasped in apprehension of the event and my fingers were at my mouth.

The Seneschal stayed in control. He spoke with the voice of authority when he said, "Now everyone calm down for a minute." Hater, Nadezhda, and I crowded right behind our brave protector

and patted him a gentle pat on the kidneys lest there be any confusion about whose side we were on. "You okay?" He demanded, gruffly.

"I'm good," I assured him.

"Stop throwing rocks at the prisoners."

"Understood."

"You, little man, back up a few steps." I never saw a countenance more dejected. "And you, fat man, stop sniveling and get to your feet." Fat Man lay awkwardly on his hands moaning and groaning. "Come on. Get up!" The Seneschal insisted kicking the soles of the dude's feet. "I didn't hit you that hard. C'mon. Get up." In fact, he had hit him that hard, a real wallop. Without opening his eyes Fat Man rolled over and managed to get onto his knees. "Help him up." The Seneschal ordered, and it took a second before I realized he was talking to me.

I tip-toed on the balls of my feet around him and grasped Fat Man by the upper arms and struggled to haul that tub of butter to a standing position. I shoved him away and ran back to hide behind my boyfriend again for safety's sake.

"Now here's what we're going to do, people. We're all going to shut our mouths and keep them shut until we reach The Master's compound.

"Fine with me," I mumbled. "I wasn't the one making derogatory remarks."

"And no more rock throwing," Little Boy spouted all pouty-like. That weighty dirt clod must have bruised his liver when it struck. I was about to retort, 'at least you didn't get your face bashed in', but I caught myself and kept quiet, rubbing my boyfriend's back trying to loosen him some. His whole body had tensed.

Our march across the wasteland resumed as the midday heat boiled dew off the cactus. Those prickly plants changed from green to brown and their texture sagged and they might have withered and died except their needles glistened. Those desert brutes would still be thriving festooned in clumps long after we were gone.

I unzipped the hoody attached to my suit and pulled it over my head as far as my eyebrows and poked the central panel located on my forearm display activating climate control. Those two forsaken fools stumbled through the sweltering glare. The Seneschal donned his floppy ranger's hat. I remember noticing he wasn't perspiring like a normal human being. Although our prisoners sweated, we never made any effort to hydrate them. I remember reading somewhere the Earth was getting hotter. In the days it took us to reach the Citadel they probably lost several pounds apiece.

Naturally we didn't go around to the front gate when we arrived at the citadel. We'd been parceling our own water for a

few days already, and the Seneschal, always the pragmatist, wanted us off the Wasteland frying pan at the earliest opportunity. On our approach from the South we entered through the gate at the back entrance. Two troopers ensconced in an air-cooled guard shack emerged into the heat of day to inspect our prisoner situation and the Seneschal's marching orders. He fished into his vest pocket and produced hard copy he'd been carrying the entire time. They blue swiped the bar code tattooed on his wrist as well as but that was just an expeditious formality. We turned our prisoners over and were shunt of them.

My companion showed me into the guest area of his fancy apartment, including not a stall but a whole open shower area. Very sexy. My memory had to search back a couple of weeks to the last trickle of potable water I'd stood beneath and called it a shower.

"Where's the timer?" I inquired as a way of broaching the more salient question about my ration quota.

"No timer," he said, not prideful; comfortable, secure in the fact.

Water so plentiful they didn't enforce rationing. I stood there dazzled and humble.

"Can I try it?" I didn't like how meek and needy I sounded.

"Sure, it's what it's there for." He turned around and opened a cabinet revealing a treasure trove of light green

cotton towels. "Help yourself to whatever you need. Make yourself comfortable. I'll go put some food on. We'll have something to eat, directly," he said, closing the bedroom door behind him.

I wrestled with my conscience over the prospect of unlimited water. Some kind of governor had to control the flow, eventually. Surely not completely unlimited. It probably shuts itself off after a while. Still, not a normal, average while. Longer than that. How much time that was remained to be seen. I would just have to try it and see.

In the filtered clean climate controlled environment I peeled off my all-terrain suit and felt sticky and grimy standing naked on the hard tile squares. I reached for the spigot knob, tentative, shy almost. Out of long habit I stood to one side testing the water quality first. My fingers clutched the serrated ivory knob and twisted like I meant it. Oh gorgeous profusion! Dancing sparks of pure evanescence sprung from the fount. My wings spread in response to the cool clear water and my poor cramped tail unraveled and drooped as if in surrender to such great good fortune.

I anticipated the water might molt my feathers. Quite the opposite turned out to be true. My plumage reacted much like any creature, like a waterfowl for instance, to a solid pelting of quality H₂O.

"I wish we had a water meter," Hater said. "I'd be curious to know the actual green count of this liquid."

"It smells nice. Feels right," I said, pressing my palms to the wall and dousing my head.

"Dis hot shower I like," Nadezhda said.

"I like it too, sweet pea."

"I misses you."

"I miss you, too. I'm lonely without you, and usually I don't feel lonely."

"You've always been a sensitive girl," Hater said.

"Fat lot of good it's done me."

I closed my eyes and lifted my face directly into the cascade and the voices active in my brain subsided.

For the first time in my life I turned the water off because I had finished showing instead of the supply cutting off before the water ration expired. I reflected upon the grim possibility that maybe I should have blown up that library if it meant having a shower like this one every day. Thus, doing the right thing and going without the perks pricked my conscience. Greed and the promise of easing discomfiture poisons the wound of poverty. Remorse over a good deed well done wasn't going to do me a bit of good. Spying a group of fancy colored bottles I unscrewed their tops one at a time and breathed each dainty fragrance. I poured a healthful dollop of a lavender scented

oil. At least I think that was the word on the label. It smelled purple. I lathered my flesh all over including my hair but not the feathers. Wing bones at the base, yes. Tail yes. The copper plate in my head, only very gently at the edges where the metal meets the flesh. Then I snapped the shower on and luxuriated rinsed and repeated, sampling a new fragrance each time. To top it all off I foamed at the mouth with tooth powder until pearly white fangs were gleaming. I was a sweet-smelling dandy by the time I finally finished.

I went for a towel to dry myself and caught myself in the reflection from a full-length mirror embedded in the wall. My hair had grown long again in the weeks spent traveling on the Wasteland. Searching through some drawers I found a scrunchy and a hair brush and used them for a comb over and to fix a braid. Obviously, I wasn't the first woman to stand here naked. The copper plate looked smaller than before, or maybe my perception was fueled by wishful thinking. I flexed my feather bones and as though responding to the attention my plumage rose and bristled beautifully, a myriad of feathers acting in concert. Poor tail wagged gamely, but she was still stove up from so many days cramped in that suit. The rest you can imagine. Hermaphrodite body. Round and womanish in my extremities. Mannish bone structure. The duality of my existence, the Janus, lover and warrior.

I turned my suit inside out and propped it in the corner to air and wrapped my naked body in a second dry towel and didn't care a fig if my bottom protruded or not. Upon entering the main room my appearance caused the Seneschal's eyebrows to arch in pleasant surprise. He mastered himself quickly and forced his facial features into their usual dour expression. I flashed my toothy grin despite the reaction it might stir in him. This creature is who I am, Pal. Take it or leave it. His eyes bespoke an appreciation not wholly unkind.

He'd taken a shower too and washed away the trail grime and slipped into some smart black martial arts pajamas and slipper-shoes, an outfit that would have looked corny on anyone else. With him you knew he meant it.

We sat down to table and my tail switched around against the chair back and ached a little still looking for a comfortable angle. My naked bottom felt smooth pressed against hard black leather and I hitched the towel over my boobs and tucked discretely.

The meal he'd cooked was nutritious and went deep, actual real ingredients like rice and vegetables. No wonder he managed to stay lean and fit if he at healthy like this all the time. He'd even added a little meat.

"Is this cat?" I had to ask.

"Dog," he informed me. "Cat is a rarity we don't see much."

"It's very good," I hastened to add, out of good manners.
"I like dog. It's really moist and good."

"Life working for the Dark Matter Corporation," he said, lifting his pewter cup and taking a self-satisfied swig of tonic. He was bragging a little. I let it pass. I didn't know what my status with the company was exactly but I doubted any midlevel entry position was going to open for me anytime soon.

He cleared the dishes by himself waving me away when I tried to lend a hand. Like most men with military training he kept his barracks slicked and tidy. Water ran on and off from a faucet. Conspicuous consumption. Plates and silverware tumbled together. In the other room, I stood in my towel tugging and tucking here and there and examining his artwork. Oriental calligraphy combined with ocean waves. Standing there in those posh surroundings inspired me to wonder what kind of war crimes he'd committed to earn such favored status.

The far wall suddenly hummed to life and a dozen slats rotated open and slid in tandem to one side revealing a sliding glass door. Then he was in the room again sliding the glass door open manually and stepping outside onto a concrete terrace. I followed his magnetism to where he stood behind the balustrade gazing at the wasteland beyond the chain link fence perimeter.

Until I was standing next to him I hadn't noticed he had a pair of military grade binoculars hanging around his neck. He

gazed through them so long I had time to wonder his field glasses meant he was super macho or a total nerd. With only my regular eyesight, I looked out at the wasteland, too.

Other than a pair of duffers headed for the exit and beyond the mountains in the distance there wasn't much to see. My boyfriend lowered his binocs and removed the safety cord from around his neck and slung it around my neck, letting me have a turn. He went inside to fill our tonic tumblers while I took a gander. Through the glasses the mountains appeared bigger, not necessarily closer. The guardhouse get. The fence. The two duffers. The dirt road. I don't usually gasp outright. The realization I was following the progress of Fat Man and Little Boy straggling towards the compound exist startled me. That's all. The Seneschal handed me my drink and my mouth hung open to express my astonishment, and a bit of outrage.

"Whattayagonnado?" He asked, uncaring. What can you make of an answer like that?

I looked again and located them at the gate where their weapons were handed back to them.

"They just rearmed them. That doesn't seem like a very good idea," I said.

"The Wasteland will swallow them up again."

I saw through the binoculars two puffs of white smoke as they murdered the guards. Then the reports echoed. I handed the

glasses back the Seneschal so he could take professional stock of the situation. A hunk of hot lead slammed into his chest and knocked him off his feet and onto his back.

"You're the bravest boyfriend I ever had," I said, kneeling down and squeezing his shoulder gently for comfort.

"I'm not your... paugh!" A gout of blood spurted from his mouth.

"Don't try to talk," I urged him. His eyes turned to marbles. He died. I took a swig of tonic and keeping my head down I crept back inside.

I could hear the crackle of small arms fire. Someone was already pounding on the front door. Feeling like one of the good guys I took a few steps towards opening it for them. They quit knocking and slammed a battering ram into the door repeatedly until it blew off its hinges. I froze midmotion, turned and ran.

I heard behind me the paramilitary shouting orders at the empty apartment. My towel slipped away as I sprinted across the balcony and planting one foot on the balustrade spread my wings and leapt into flight. My wings stroked the air lifting me higher. A bullet whizzed past my ear. Fat Man's aim definitely pulled to the right.

Poom! Poom!

Two cargo nets enveloped me overlapping as my wings folded in self-defense. I plummeted from the sky. The ground rapidly

approached. The nets tightened around me and buoyed me up so I didn't go splat. I swung helplessly trussed into the shade under the balcony and back out into the sunlight. A bullet grazed the netting and for a moment rocking back and forth in space I forgot who was shooting. The thought passed through my mind, given the number of people currently trying to kill me, maybe I should re-evaluate my approach to other people.

Two ropes lowered me to the ground, slowly. A whole squad of troopers came stomping to surround me. My moment of doubt passed under a verbal barrage of shouted commands issuing contradictory orders. As they pulled away the netting I rolled over onto my stomach and put my hands behind my back over my wings. The troopers formed such a frantic pack of gun nuts, if one of them had fired his weapon, the whole bunch might have shot their wad in sympathy and I wouldn't have ended up the only one dead. They eventually stopped shouting and one of them let go his own pistola long enough to pounce on me even though I wasn't resisting arrest. Then they all pounced on me. One of those valiant officers electrocuted his fellow officers when his Taser went off prematurely. I ended up pinioned by two set of handcuffs and one hapless trooper tethered to my ankle. Dark Matter Troopers usually meant deadly business. I'm not sure who those guys were, exactly. I think maybe too many guys mustered at once and the whole scene turned into a cluster situation.

They managed to get the one trooper unshackled from my ankle and then they hoisted me to my feet.

"The shots are coming from the fenceline," I said, somewhat worried the psychopath Fat Man might squeeze off another round and finally get lucky. They shouted me down, basically telling me to keep quiet and hold my tongue and sensing their urgency I obliged them. If you're poor, the wheels of justice grind you up slowly, but they do grind. If you're rich, justice sees her course most clearly, or something like that.

The Troopers escorted me none too gently into the building all the while pestering me with questions making it clear they thought I had something to do with assassinating the Seneschal. I tried to explain to them about the men taking aim near the gate. Their counter theory contended I somehow conspired with those men at the gate to set up the victim. Of course, my accomplices had been allowed to disappear into the desert so my word had to contend with their cockamamie theory, and with two guards dead they needed a scapegoat to hold responsible for the myriad derelictions of duty. The troopers made it abundantly clear they considered me a mutant, a disgusting creature to be feared and reviled, in the subtext an easy mark to take the blame for letting those two desert rats go in the first place and secondly handing back to them their weapons as they walked out the gate. Regardless of what the Seneschal might have said,

they were really only guilty of attempted murder of a mutant and incredibly bad aim, the first time they aimed at me, I mean, in the Wasteland.

Shooting the Seneschal as he stood on his balcony was probably an error. Their target had been me the entire time, ever since they urinated on me in my cage there where I was sleeping. Let's face it. Nobody loves a mutant. Not even other mutants. Suppose I had some way of accessing the evidence from my trial among the liberals proving I was more human than mutant I seriously doubted these conservatives would even listen to scientific evidence. They were ignorant of science, and their stupidity made them dangerous.

For as much as I detest courtrooms and the law as it gets practiced I have been tried and convicted several times in my various incarnations and sometimes I stood guilty as charged but a few other times I was actually innocent and they still found me guilty. Not that it mattered. I never suffered more outrageously biased nonsense than I did at the hands of the Dark Matter Corporation. You couldn't call that lying pack of jackanapes a tribunal. They blamed me for everything when I was the victim. They joined in victimizing me because it was more politically expedient for them. They were lying sniveling cretins, and they patted each other on the back and

congratulated each other on how together they were in their brotherhood.

The troopers forced me onto my knees and for a moment I thought they were going to do me a favor and chop my head off. A sense of calm and relaxation swept over me. Nobody carried swords anymore, though. What they did produce on the spot was a hack saw and a rubber tube they shoved sideways into my mouth so I wouldn't bite off my own tongue. The metal teeth of the saw ripped into my flesh at the base of my right wing. When the sawing teeth struck bone zip zip zip then I knew pain.

During the amputation of my second wing I passed out. They told me later I almost died after they sawed off my tail. At some point it dawned on somebody to summon a medical officer. I awoke aching in every bone and joint strategically bandaged like a baby in swaddling clothes. I was lying on my stomach on a hospital bed. The medicos choked a few pain pills down my throat in response to my eye rolling pain delirium. Apparently they lacked anesthetic and it never occurred to the bully boys to provide pain pills before they started sawing off my appendages. Only after the mayhem had begun did they decide they wanted me to live. The operation was for my own good.

The savagery of the attack on me and the haphazard medical care afterwards hinted at a crumbling infrastructure not readily discernable on the surface of the day to day operations of the

citadel. The facility had at one time been capable of performing a brain transplant. Now they were scrambling to produce proper pain medications. The pills they did proscribe weren't quite right. I could still feel the pain but the pills made me not care how much it hurt.

I lay prostrated on the hospital bed dazed by the vicious cruelty and numb to the voices around me. They still understood enough about forensics to conclude the Seneschal had not been shot at close range. Enough troopers remembered the grudge match that had developed during the mission between the desert rats and me. In spite of their macho bravado the troopers had neither the gumption nor the wherewithal to gather a posse comitatus to search for the real culprits.

I awoke from my drugged state long enough to realize Flash was sitting in a chair a few feet away from my bed. His myopic black rimmed spectacles sharpened his vision enough to realize I was awake.

"Howya feeling?"

"I've felt better. Considering I was brutally assaulted and body parts were sawed off... I don't know," I said, my harangue running out of energy mid sentence.

Flash had the decency to avert his gaze and study his white sneakers in chagrin. "The troops in question acted rashly."

"Ya think?" I demanded, channeling the spirit of my erstwhile lover Rachel Cozy. "Are they going to be punished for what they did to me?"

"No, actually, their behavior is sanctioned under Dark Matter policy guidelines concerning the treatment of non-human mutants. I won't go into the legal jargon, but their actions were perfectly justifiable, legally. In fact, as a mutant, they would have acted well within the law to end your life."

"Why didn't they then?" I expostulated with a world weary sigh.

"Because we have too much invested in you," Flash declared, flatly, pointing right to the bottom line. "They could have handled the situation better," he conceded, sitting forward in his chair. "But hey, look at you, all normal again. You didn't even have time to make onto the Mutant Watch List, and you've been officially reassigned as female, so actually, you're back where you started."

"Curtesy of the Dark Matter Corporation." My sarcasm didn't register with him, or maybe it did, as he lapsed into myopic silence.

The Nurse arrived and shooed Flash out of the room so she could change my bandages. She treated me decently because she didn't know anything about my personal life and we never discussed religion, except the first time she changed my groin

bandage when she made some remark about God's mysterious ways in reaction to Doctor Fathom's handiwork. I said please and thank you a lot and tried not to complain. Several surgeons came and went wanting to interview me extensively about the mutations my body had undergone during my absence. They denounced the attack on my person as barbarous and from a technical point of view I think they meant it but the overriding concern was disappointment in the opportunity lost for the first-hand observation of some pretty outrageous side effect and the furtherance of medical knowledge. After those first few interviews the surgeons and research heavy hitters disappeared replaced by a younger man who warned me very time about the danger of infections as though I had any control over the matter. I succeeded in wearing him down on providing better pain medication. He sent me on a South Sea cruise, so to speak, for a few weeks straight, and by the time I emerged dopy and groggy my physical wounds had healed. They didn't offer any psychological counseling considering from their point of view had done me a favor. As the recounting of subsequent events I hope will make clear, the extent their attack had an adverse effect on my personality.

Neither Hater nor Nadezhda held it against me when I turned into a monster hell bent upon the destruction of all mankind. The three of us had more or less accepted sprouting wings and a

tale as the type of aberration to be expected after a brain transplant as well as exposure to high levels of radiation and other toxic chemicals so prevalent riding on the winds of the wastelands. The violent removal of these appendages felt far more unnatural than did their arrival in the first place. Call them a mutation, call them what you will, my wings and tail had an organic origin. They grew from me as part and parcel of the whole. Given time I would have mastered the intricacies of flight. Subsequently, I dreamed of the attendant exhilaration. I could have adapted.

The Dark Matter Corporation dressed me in a white long-sleeved blouse barely encompassing my rather abundant cleavage. My midriff was left exposed until the red and black checkered miniskirt, ridiculously short. Either my hip bones or my derriere were going to be left exposed, one or the other. The black lace stockings reached all the way up and the shiny black shoes with rock solid stems were magnificent, I must admit. My hair had grown longer. Left unchecked it fell to the middle of my back. I felt very much like a kept woman, an object drooled over by every admiring glance. My fangs softened. My claws retracted into long fingernails painted several colors. I'd come so close to morphing into a bad girl super hero. Now I was regressing into a normal everyday sort of babe.

Flash tethered me at the end of a leather leash long enough to allow me to roam at a distance but short enough to reign me in should I attack anyone. This leash routine was largely symbolic. The death of the Seneschal and my rehabilitation as a woman so beautiful she saddened men's hearts required the observation of a certain decorum. I would be kept on the end of a leash so any observer could see and understand my status as a slave to my Master's will.

I understood the conservative will to penetrate. The sexual drive amounted to nothing more than a biological urge to reproduce resulting from a million years of evolution. Procreation is the only demonstrable meaning for our existence. Everything else is metaphysical nonsense or some other construct. So where does the urge to publicly humiliate a female arise? Flash paraded me around the corridors of the citadel dressed like a prostitute cum schoolgirl.

A certain placidity reigned over my demeanor. I sat with long legs crossed. Fingers with manicured painted red nails crossed politely in my lap. I suffered my keeper to tease my hair and paint my lips a bright and luxuriant red. They darkened my eye shadow and lengthened my lashes. I sat quietly, eyes averted in deference. They fed me choice portions. I ate like a bird. My posture remained poised. My attitude meek and submissive. I was a perfect little help meet.

And thus I existed. Weeks turned into months. Months into a year. I wasn't sure how old I was, exactly. My brain and body were different ages. Spiritually, I was a beaten creature, chastened and subdued. I was not the only trophy enslaved in the Master's harem and brought forth periodically to be put on display. A kind of imbecility set in during this period of my captivity. I bathed with the other girls or was bathed by them. We took turns washing and messaging each other. I daresay some of those young women fell in love with me. Unfortunately for them my heart beat hollow and empty. I had no love. I held them in my arms and stroked their hair but my gaze stared absently towards the Wasteland.

My physical scars healed over time. The memory of pain left me meek and humble in the presence of men capable of such an atrocity. I receded into the scenery. I strove with every minimal gesture to remain off the radar. I paid a price for my humility no doubt. A bit of the old fire went out. I searched around the entire compound for any kind of reading matter I could find. Preserving the written word was obviously not high on corporate's list of priorities. Electronic texts had been scrubbed a long time ago. Texts made from papyrus and thread had a way of surviving. From time to time I quietly beseeched Flash to show me around the citadel. He came to enjoy our little guided tours and yet he never once sought any kind of sexual

favours. In fact, none of the men in that place were sexually active. Beneath the boy's club façade impotency plagued each and every one. Not surprisingly, they pretended the problem didn't exist and kept up appearances for each other through wrestling and boxing and gymnastics but as far as I could tell there wasn't a boner among them. So when Flash volunteered to show me the basement I didn't blush twice at accepting. There wasn't much else to do and it wasn't like he was trying to lead me into some dark confine to compromise my integrity. The positive electrons had all turned into neutrons. I was comfortable.

This basement area had remained dry and cool through many years of disuse. Low and behold we discovered a bookcase. The volumes stored on the shelves bore no markings so they couldn't have belonged to any kind of a lending library. A few tomes had the bookplate of the original owner, at best a barbarous practice. Most of these books had belonged in someone's private collection sometime long in the past. It said the man's name on the bookplates but I've forgotten it now.

I withdrew various volumes from the shelves and perused their title pages. Flash clearly didn't share my interest in ancient printed matter. His attention strayed until he'd rotated a half turn in search of something else, anything else, to occupy his attention. The sight of him with his back turned to me wrought upon my psyche a most curious effect. A word popped

into my mind I hadn't entertained for ages, and the word was the following: revenge.

In the moment, I grabbed the leash and jerked with all my might. The force spun Flash around until he faced me. A questioning expression crossed his face to which I supplied an answer by smashing my knuckles into his nose. He let go the leash handle as he crashed onto his back against the floor and blood spurted everywhere. I employed both hands removing the choker chain and fixing it around his neck and yanking it tight. I dragged him around the floor by the neck this way and that fairly strangling him in the process. I ordered him to stop grabbing the collar and put his hands down several times as he scrabbled at the chain. A lack of oxygen convinced him to comply with my command and I relinquished some of the tension. Let's face it. Violence solves everything.

A random riggitybebob fluttered out of a dust strewn corner of the basement and came towards me and I brushed it away and it took the rejection in stride. This part of my saga I like to call taking Flash prisoner and forcing him to strip naked and then sliding my own silk panties down my long legs and handing them over and ordering him to put them on and he did as I ordered although he stood a head shorter and had to ball them into a fist at the side like a convict to prevent them from sliding.

"Please don't do this, Nika," he begged me.

"You're not my boyfriend," I snarled, jerking the choker chain tight and momentarily cutting off his air supply.

I had other outfits, by the way, and it was just a coincidence I happened to be dressed like a school girl prostitute again a year later. The cool air in the basement felt delicious against my scantily clad bottom but I'm allowing dirty sex to distract from the wholesome violence.

I commanded Flash to proceed me as we made our way along the hallway and rode a service elevator up to the scientific section. Nobody was standing guard like they should have been at that time of day. I'd watched this kind of slack disorder undo more than one corporate military post in my time. I was never able to confirm my suspicions but my impression remains since the Seneschal's death no one had stepped forward to take up the slack in command and alcohol consumption, always copious in any fraternity, spiraled out of control without my boyfriend's temperate guidance.

I can honestly say when I started for the laboratories I had no specific goal in mind. Flash intuited a possible goal before I did. He led me straight to the specimen storage tanks. Sure enough, my beautiful white wings occupied two cylindrical tanks standing side by side and filled with some kind of sepia-toned embalming fluid. They were so lovely, my wings. A steady

stream of tiny air bubbles rose from the bottom like oxygen in a fish tank, something to do with preservation. They sparkled like pearls on a necklace. In a similar vat nearby my poor tail bobbed suspended in a sepia preservative of its own. In the moment I was of two minds. One part of me wanted to reconnect with those precious gifts imparted to me as a buttress against the depredations of the Wasteland. My other mind told me no purpose would be served in perusing romantic notions from the long dead past. I had striven tantalizingly close to the dream of flight. In my heart I'd always believed I held the power to transcend the mundane cares of this world and travel through more ethereal regions fancy free. Hence I was approaching the end of my second decade and what had I to show for it? Nothing more than perpetual warfare with the Powers That Be bent upon destroying my genial spirits. They'd obviously won this round, hands down for all the world to see. But I wasn't dead, yet. Well, I had been dead, then I became alive again, then stripped of my lovely plumage I was kept on as some kind of sick joke. In a way I still felt a burden weighing on my shoulders. Let us see, I vowed, where normal leads us. Let us see who has greater staying power.

I whipped the chain giddyap and Flash and I exited the laboratories and headed for the South Gate and the awful freedom of the Wasteland.

I fully expected to be challenged at gunpoint when we reached the guard shack. As we approached I heard snoring, and drawing opposite the door I could see several of those clear glass bottles filled with Government Grade Tonic. I'd heard you could go blind drinking that rocket fuel straight.

Creeping closer I struck my head in the door to take a quick look around for anything worth stealing. I helped myself to a big jug of potable water and a cylinder of sunscreen and a pair of men's hair clippers I used to shave Flash down to the bare nubs. I doused his lily-white exterior with the sun screen and though he appeared shorn and miserable without the UV protection he would have baked into a blister under the glare of the Wasteland sun. I removed the boots and socks from the sleeping drunk guard and forced oily boy to wear them. They were a bit too big but not a bad fit.

For the first leg of our journey I stuck to the main road. Having studied the operation crumbling from the inside I doubted they would notice right away we were missing let alone launch a posse to search for us. Flash embodied a top-level advisor but he was in reality more of a field operative higher up the food chain than the Seneschal. Still, he spent much of his time out of doors only reporting back to the Citadel periodically and he certainly wasn't ripe for a promotion after the glaring failure of our last mission, although if I haven't said it before I'm

glad I didn't blow up those nice liberals, even if they did end up booting me from their colony.

So wherever we were heading we weren't going to Liberalville, obviously. My biggest problem was that I didn't own a map or a compod and had no idea where we were, specifically in relation to anywhere else. To say the truth I have a terrible sense of direction. I figured if we continued on a more or less straight line away from our point of origin we would probably be okay. I say we. It wasn't like Flash was my boyfriend or anything.

I steered my hostage off road and across the Wasteland towards a rock protuberance hollowed by several eons of rain, a triumphal arch celebrating mankind's drop in the bucket existence, a time portal separating the past I was escaping for future parts unknown. Before stepping through I paused at the threshold to commemorate the moment, feeling myself very much on the stage of history I unshouldered the voluminous bag and pulled from it my pistol and The Bible and tossed them both into the dirt. In the future we would have no need for firearms nor superstition-fueled violence. I felt secure in my decision to leave them both behind. I paused for a moment to consider whether or not I might let my prisoner go and thus rid the future of slavery's scourge as well. I concluded while I

couldn't very well set my prisoner free in the moment I would set him free in my last will and testament.

We stepped through the time portal separating the past from the future and I threw one last glance backwards.

The truth, while not always impressive, remains nevertheless the truth and carries with it a certain cache as well as hope for redemption putting me in mind of a portion of my life's narrative I haven't previously committed to these pages, an oversight I now intend to remedy. As you may remember I was at a very tender age deposited for safe keeping at an orphanage by my mother, a woman fallen from a high estate, and my wicked stepfather, a man whose constant duplicity the world repeatedly rewarded and never punished. He coerced my mother into abandoning me. I distinctly remember her tears and the sadness in her eyes as that man drew her away from me outside the entrance to that infernal institution. In fairness let it be said that while I lived under their guardianship the staff at the orphanage took very proper care of me. They fed me like clockwork three times a day. I always had a roof over my head, a warm bunk bed to sleep in, and durable shoes on my feet. I was neither beaten nor interfered with at any time and while it's true my education was wholly ignored as far as book learning was concerned, the laws against educating girls being rather specific on the point of no reading or writing, the training I

did receive in lawn care and landscaping, while tedious and sweaty, formed my work ethic according to the simple precept that life is work and work is life and in this life you must pay your own way or starve. To rebel against that sacred capitalistic principal might precipitate headlong expulsion from the promised land of well-manicured lawns and moral decency into the burning depths of the poor and unfortunate. For all my days I have vied for an exception to this rule without success and so I am convinced none exists. For the sin of being born poor you must pay and pay and pay.

I remember the day a select number of us girls were headed into a shower where several of the matrons soaped us up and hosed us down. They also brushed our teeth for us, an operation I was perfectly capable of performing myself but as an aside I must admit I rather liked the personal attention for whatever reason and smiled like an imbecile. Our nails were scraped and trimmed both fingers and toes. Our ears were swabbed, our bottoms freshened, and lastly we were slathered in baby oil before we were marched into a roomful of men and onto a dais where we were sold at auction.

The buyers were exclusively male. I can remember their jocund expressions and their avidity for the process of buying little girls as property. In my prelapsarian state my nakedness occasioned no guilt or shame. In truth, I didn't really

understand what was happening to me. Raised in a culture where male power reigned supreme in every respect I lacked the cognitive ability to challenge such overwhelming authority. Whatever we were doing must've been right since the male chief of the orphanage was standing right there officiating over the grand proceedings. As a female, let alone a little girl, one simply did not challenge male dominance. My whole upbringing had been dictated by these beliefs ensuring my complete passivity. I passed an arm behind my back and gripped my other elbow. My gaze had passed across the room and taken in their faces. I had noted the strange, intense way their eyes sparkled. We must've presented quite a spectacle, our naked bodies shimmering. Maintaining eye contact wasn't really an option so I cast my gaze upon the ground and waited for whatever would happen next.

My four little friends and I were purchased in a block by a buyer representing the master, not the master himself. Him we wouldn't meet for several weeks.

In the meantime iron slave collars were fastened around our necks and secured by a miniature padlock. Our arms were pinioned behind our backs by a leather thong. My posture was already half way there so well trained was my attitude. Then our collars were strung together by a metal chain of interlocking links. Not the most formidable piece of ironmongery but strong enough to pinion our thin necks.

Arranged in a nice neat line the buyer our new owner produced from his high boot a leather riding crop. In a foreign tongue I couldn't understand he seemed to be lecturing us on an important procedural point as he went up and down the line slapping our bare bottoms. To me the lesson was clear enough. He expected our obedience. Message received. Understood.

In my acquiesce I suddenly realized he was no long talking to the whole crew but addressing me directly. He smacked my bare bottom and with great consternation in his voice pointed at the empty space in from of me. With his stiff leather riding crop he slapped my bare bottom harder and harder delivering a deliberate and controlled spanking. The hot tingling sensation set me marching in place, my suppliant eyes filling with tears. I would do anything he demanded, I pleaded, but i didn't understand. Again he pointed and again swatted my naked bottom. Finally, it dawned on me he wanted me to move forward in the direction he kept indicating with his torture instrument.

Greatly relieved at breaking the language code the croup lurched me forward a few steps before I was about yanked off my feet by the drag on the chain connected to the girl behind me who apparently wasn't with the program yet and remained stock still.

I appealed to the slave driver's sense of fair play. Certainly I was doing my best to obey his command but was I

really expected to do everything by myself? A little teamwork here. A little help. Sensing my willingness to work with him he applied the lash to the second tiny bottom waking her to the starting parade.

I called out, "Come on!" to my companions inspiring the entire procession to lurch into motion. I could hear the sharp contact of leather on flesh behind me as the slave driver did his job. My bottom already glowed a stinging pink. That didn't stop my master from administering one more swat for good measure. I grimaced and grunted under the assault pleasing the sadist with the whip in his hand. The bidding audience was in an uproar, the other gentlemen fit to be tied at the performance we were putting on in front of them. From my perspective I didn't find it funny. I didn't want my bottom spanked. I was a good little girl.

Two men ensconced behind dark glasses and wearing black suits and red ties opened double doors for us and we left the high comedy behind us as a new lot of shy well-ordered little girls was brought to the stage. Our lot proceeded down a hallway until we arrived at a fork in the tunnel, I looked undecided to the man with the black leather crop for guidance. He gabbled in that unknown foreign tongue indicating with his rod I should bear right. I was a perfectly reasonable person. I would go in any direction a man wielding a whip wanted me to go. As any of

the matrons in that Christian orphanage can attest, I always did as I was told.

We weren't the only lot loaded into the transport that night. The slave driver removed the chains before we climbed aboard. I got the feeling the restraints were only there for show anyway. The whip man swatted my bare bottom one last time as I was climbing in. I'd only been a slave less than an hour so I hadn't learned the proper reserved. In the moment, I was scandalized because he beat me for my slow response and for my cooperation both. In my innocence and naivety, I didn't understand a whipping constituted a law unto itself without any reference to fairness or justice. A whipping wasn't about rewards or punishments. Prickly pain was a state of being. The whip was about obedience and instilling a subservient state of mind. Resist, you take a beating. Obey, you take a whipping. Once included sensuality; the other most assuredly did not.

Your attitude had nothing to do with certain slave eventualities. The Master's will existed independently of my reaction to the lash. The only proper response was gratitude for the time and effort lavished on such an unworthy recipient.

We were piled in on top of each other and our oily bodies slipped and slid producing a friction humiliating for the pleasure it induced. By the time the van finally stopped pitching and rocking we were sisters of the skin with new

knowledge unearthed and latent desire dispelling our fear of the unknown. We were thoughtless little dodos when we entered the van. On the trip we had wet ourselves, every one. Shy, subdued, but with the light of Eve in our eyes, we climbed down out of the raucous pleasure chamber and stood on a dock next to a ship waiting to take us on our next adventure. Our curiosity overcame our fear of the unknown. Famished as one always is afterwards, we somehow knew the food on this voyage was going to be delicious.

We were reclining in the seraglio one day when I noticed two chipper young maidens sitting next to each other and whispering secrets into their hands cupped over each other's ears. I'd been lying idly by for a time with friends of my own stretched out on either side. We were exhausted after our most recent exertions. Lord and Lady had wandered through during our performance and afterward they could not have been more pleased. Our congress was a success and now I gently fingered the hair of my co-star, pleasing contact to her I could sense as the three of us despumated.

I'm not sure how many days later I saw those two girls together again at the beach. Their appearance must have struck me as odd because pairing like that wasn't necessarily encouraged. At least my impression at the time said keep moving from partner to partner. You did have your big sisters and

little sisters in your pod and you were bound to them for safekeeping and support as your homegroup. We gathered together on the bedding in our underground cell every night renewing the bonds of kinship. During the day though I felt tempest tossed on the fluctuation of bodies constantly on the move from one end of the island to the other. I'd never learned anybody's name. Each encounter presented a new girl every time and as for the boys, why would you bother to learn their names? You wouldn't gain anything by that kind of familiarity when they would only disappear to their side of the island and we never saw them during the separation lasting a fortnight.

Those two girls had found each other and nobody seemed to object. Over a series of weeks they earned enough credits for a tattoo upgrade and they took the unprecedented step of enduring the engraving of matching roses to embroider their navels. Red petals with green stems arching away so when they stood next to each other you could see plain as day they were meant to present a matching pair. That night cradled in my big sister's arms I questioned her about the singularity of the twin's arrangement. Poor dear. She reflected for a moment before declaring she too had a best friend once but she couldn't remember her name, an older girl who moved on when the time had come. I made a noise of sadness and commiseration before realizing the thought had

already flitted from her mind. So this pairing, this kind of partnering, wasn't unheard of on the island.

Whenever I saw my flower girls together on the sea of bodies I endeavored to edge closer. A couple of times I even managed to wedge myself between them. They tasted salty and tan. I reviewed my credit score despairing I could ever rise high enough to join them in a tattooed triumvirate. A fantasy of my own making residing solely in my own head alone. They were a duo, we were not a trio, and I skulked away before anyone, including them, marked the intrusion.

I wasn't present on the beach the day the brunette disappeared. I heard the story later from everybody else. The blonde girl reclined in the sand while her besty went for a swim. Witnesses reported they noticed the dour change of expression on her face when she sprang up a few moments later and immediately felt the absence. She started screaming. Everybody scanned the blue and green water crashing brown and white. Her twin had vanished. The ocean snatched her away that quickly.

Oh separation and inconsolable grief. Where had she gone? How could she have disappeared so fast? Papa himself came down out of his penthouse to find out what the general commotion was about and was not out of the elevator door for a second before a hundred of his naked little maidens pointed towards the living

embodiment of tragic sorrow, collapsed in my arms. I didn't mean to be an opportunistic reptile. I felt the sorrow we all felt. Papa took the blonde girl from me into his own arms and carried her sitting on one of his muscular forearms back down to the beach. The entire mob followed no longer babbling but fallen bone silent now that Papa was on the scene and taking charge. I stood by near enough to hear his interrogative tone as he sought to understand the problem. Calm. Firm. Insistent. Her poor languid little arm rose and fell, indicating the sea was to blame. Papa understood. He always understood everything. I watched his jaw tighten in rebellion against a world where little girls were made sad. He carried her weeping frame and several of us from the same age group followed him as the silent crowd parted and we followed him onto the elevator without even being invited in and the doors sucked shut.

Our cloister of little mourners followed Papa as he bore the poor grief-stricken lover through his lavish apartments on his way to the suttee woven together from black leather. The solemnity of the circumstances barred us from joining him and her. Normally we would have gathered round him and piled him under. Instead we flopped ourselves on the floor behind him. Some girls assumed the suppliant position on their knees, hands behind their backs although the leather training thong binding their wrists had long ago been removed. Eyes averted. Mouth

loosely open. Tong languid, visible. This posture constituted one of the seven sacred attitudes a girl might assume, no doubt, and the three who adopted the pose now did so flawlessly. For my posture I chose the Godiva. The simplest and easiest pose for a girl to learn. Elbow cocked. Resting full weight on the arm. Legs curled out to the side. Something told me we were going to be here for a while. My intuition proved correct and waving the other girls off their knees so we created a uniform appearance wasn't difficult. Papa liked us in unison.

His muscled black kimono silhouetted against the bay window offered an expansive view of the ocean. He flipped that tiny morsel across his lap and warmed her bottom under a methodical administration of patty-pats. We'd all been there before. Spare the rod, spoil the child. We could hear the demons squirming and protesting as Papa's practiced hand summoned the prickly red and inflamed pleasure evil spirits find so intolerable. The demon's protestations rose to a squeal and gushed forth in final exorcism and the hard frame purged of bad emotions arched her back and poised bobbed and fell limp. A perfect spanking. He then lifted the cleansed creature and propped her on his knees and whispered in her ear about the almighty's love. To this day I still get a tingly bottom anytime anybody mentions god's love.

As the Sun sank into the ocean we girls slid into full repose there upon the carpeting, Papa holding his gentle angel and rocking her in his powerful arms to restore her equilibrium.

In the morning we were brazenly awakened by the swish of her leather whip through the air as a dominatrix strode about the room. Papa and the blonde girl were nowhere in sight. We were on our knees in a suppliant's second, allow me to assure you. The Domina ordered us onto our bare feet and herded us towards the elevator. A couple of the girls received smart smacks across the bottom but the Domina wasn't intent on punishment. She was looking to clear the room. She didn't follow us onto the elevator. As you might well imagine when the doors whooshed shut and we descended nervous giggles broke in relief from our mouths. I inspected the red lash marks with my fingers while feigning an air of concern. Really, I just wanted to caress their flesh. No one complained either way.

At the bottom of the shaft the doors opened with a swish and we jostled our way off the elevator. Clusters of curious young girls stood about the grassy area talking over the previous day's tragedy and though we had just emerged from the center of the penthouse the whole compound already knew more about the latest developments than we who'd been so close to the action.

The drowned girl's body had washed up on one of the beaches beyond the dividing wall where a group of boys found it on the sand and conveyed the naked corpse straight to Papa from the boy's entrance. The body appeared tan and lean with the little belly rose tattoo without so much as a bruise or blemish. Only the eyes had changed. Whereas before they had sparkled blue and shy they now appeared a dull and lifeless gray. The boys handed the body over to the seneschal and were promptly excluded from further involvement.

Our banishment didn't stop the gossip. Upstairs they laid the dead body on a bed in one of the rooms and I heard they brought in her little friend to view the body. I heard she shrieked at the ghastly sight of her one true love and covered her own face as though to block the horrible image from her mind too late. She recognized who was lying in state before her. A lot of different stories circulated concerning what happened next. Most versions imply the little blonde girl overcome with grief tried to join her dead lover on the bed as though the power of hugging and kissing might be enough to revive her. She had to be pried loose and carried away bodily. I don't know for sure because I wasn't there. Those were the kinds of stories people were telling after the fact.

Word came down from Papa's penthouse by means of a decree. Today was declared a day of mourning. Everybody was ordered back

to their cells and we were to spend the time praying for the soul of the departed brunette as well as the little blonde girl drowning in sorrow.

The solemnity of the occasion filled us all with a sense of sorrow as we padded down the concrete stairs leading to the underground bunker where we climbed through the aperture into the padded grotto occupied by our cell of sisters.

Night fell and suddenly Domina's filled the hallway with their voices shouting orders for us to report outside. We were to report to the amphitheater without any noise or commotion. Thousands of girls complied without a whisper.

On the stage a funeral pyre had been erected. The flower child's body had been laid to rest on top. Her little friend sat in the front row between her big sister and the chief Eunuch. Her face looked blurry with grief distorting her features. The arms encircling her propped her up but supplied no surcease from sadness. We waited and watched as Papa took center stage before the pyre and carried in his hand the Big Black Book.

"This island exists for the sole purpose of pleasure. My happiness, your happiness, depend on a gladness of heart and a lightness of spirit. Sadness and a nation of discontents have I banished to that outside world full of pain and despair and death. God has commanded us to be happy as we pursue our pleasure. He demands our love, both of him and of each other, to

be open and available with our sex without hesitation. Never say no always say yes the Lord commands. Do what feels good morning noon and night. Love each other. Love and be loved, and happiness will follow you all of your days. Somehow we have failed him. The death and sadness I sought to banish in the name of God has found us. Through providence he has made known to us his displeasure. As you consider the night sky and behold the starlight twinkling, you know as well as I do the bright and eternal light of the Lord shines through the firmament. For as many stars as you perceive know the Lord has perforated eye holes so that he might better see us in the dark. Know the Sun in the daytime is his brightest glare and to stare back face to face would leave you blind. God sends the moon to pull our spirits and she waxes and wanes over our desires. The ocean gives life and takes it away. These signs are fixed and eternal. He watches over us demanding you be naked in his sight. Demanding you seek pleasure and supply pleasure without question and without hesitation. I am but God's poor emissary here on this planet. What help can I give if you will not come with your bodies willingly to me? If you will not give of yourselves every ounce of pleasure? Only then can we enjoy the blessings of peace and love, we his special creatures, his chosen few. I lay no blame. I make no accusations. It lies in perfect logic that this little sister you all knew was taken from us not to punish her

but to punish all of you. I beseech you to look inside your own hearts and think about whether or not you have given freely of yourself upon every occasion. Have you pleased yourself enough? Have you pleased your sisters? Have you pleased every sister you encounter beyond your pod? When the boys come over after the full moon have you given yourself freely to each and every one of them as they sought pleasure from you? In light of this tragedy we must soul search. We must free our hearts and minds and bodies as we start over from the beginning. From this day forward greet every girl you meet as your sister. Touch her body. Seek her tender parts. Kiss her lips so that she might feel your love. Before you begin the physical rituals causing you to cry out with pleasure make a sincere plea to God to please accept your humble offering. He rejoices at the smell of a burnt offering in the same way he receives the aromas generated by your pleasure. Offer up to him your bodily fluids in the same way we throw animal flesh on the flames. No acting, no pretending, but the sincere and honest and heartfelt release of your pure sexual energy rising up to the moon and the stars and the sun and the rain. From this night forward let us begin anew to please God by releasing to him in his honor the pure energy of our sexual pleasure, knowing that more than anything else in life this is what he wants from us in return for the

miracle of our creation. Let pleasure return to this island. Let happiness reign."

Papa finished his sermon. He took one of the nearby burning torches and he touched the flame to the dry wood of the funeral pyre and the blaze rose into the night sky carrying with it the soul of the dearly departed. Everybody I talked to later agreed it was the best way possible to say we were sorry for withholding our pleasure. We implored His forgiveness and let me assure you no one in the following orgy restrained their desires in the heat provided by those flames.

On the day following a group of us girls entered the grotto where we underwent the purification process. The first stage involved wading through the chemical dip trough and submerging at the half way point before emerging on the other side depilated and pure. Next we good girl passed beneath a series of waterfalls washing away the organic solvent. Slaves who had requested to stay on after their years were served approached with soft sponges and the gentlest soaps lathering to a creamy froth. They brushed our teeth for us and irrigated our other ends as well. Clean and refreshed inside and out we passed one by one underneath several veils of sweet scented oils falling like rain and emerging hairless and slippery as a pod of little eels.

Greeted and caressed by sunshine and soft breezes we emerged from the grotto and slithered across the grassy quad or paraded plain as day in front of everybody and their admiring approving gaze. The boys were still locked away on their side of the wall otherwise the scene following would have been uproarious. We knew we were beautiful. We lingered on display. The older girls with their sly smiles flattered our narcissism. We received warm praise from all sides for our blatant exhibitionism. At the end of our parade a celebration commenced lasting the rest of the afternoon. I don't mean to brag but our group brought the whole island together that day.

The prolonged slipping and sliding in so large a cluster left us sleepy and torpid, enervated in the flesh pots filled to brimming. In these iron receptacles our days of mourning passed and we followed the course Papa commanded and pursued happy pleasure until even God would smile again.

Life on Pleasure Island had barely returned to routine when one of the big sisters in our pod gathered us together to inform us of another tragedy. In despair over her lost lover the surviving flower child, the little blonde girl, had leapt to her death from the tallest tower of the citadel. She had taken the leap was the phrase everybody used leading to the shocking revelation she was not the first to plummet on purpose from that precipice. That jumping off point existed as a choice you could

make, and no one, neither Papa nor the Eunuchs nor the Dominas, would try to stop you.

On the island existed girls originating from two distinct backgrounds. The first type were referred to as Naturals, girls born on the island who had no experience wearing clothing or any other restrictions imposed by the outside world. The other type were known as Orphans because like me they'd been purchased from an orphanage. This type of girl, like me, had to be retrained and her thinking remolded to fit the demands and rigors of sex slavery. To these recognized types I would sneak in another, Changlings. This group consisted of girls who were kidnap victims. They'd been nabbed from school playgrounds, off the street, or right from their homes during wartime. These shell shocked little creatures often had the hardest time adjusting to life on the island and sought to end the mortification of their flesh by taking the leap rather than surrendering their will to the demands of life in the harem. Once some people got a certain idea stuck into their heads like morality it was impossible for them to shake it loose. Nobody called these stolen children changelings except me. You either qualified as a natural or an orphan, and if you were an orphan your teachers and trainers and dominas assumed you would exhibit adaption issues. Most inhibitions were stripped away early and a girl joined a pile without hesitation from then on. A few months later, let alone a

few years, and no Powersby watching from the audience an on command performance could tell the difference between a natural and an orphan. To my knowledge only changelings tested their wings from the tallest tower in the citadel.

Nobody told me we had the choice of opting out of life. I'd seen girls stop eating and curl up into a sack of bones and die, or others who the Dominas grew tired of beating and berating and they were removed and disappeared somewhere else. They purchased me when I was so innocent and naive resisting the teachings never occurred to me. The Dominas did it, the older girls did it, and you want to grow up and be like them, don't you? Don't you want friends? Don't you want to fit in? Don't you want to be normal like everyone else? Don't you want love? God is watching. I was surrounded by naturals who threw themselves with gleeful abandon into every performance. The more energetically you participated the more pleasure you enjoyed. Your food rations grew tastier and more plentiful. I performed whatever action I was shown. I wanted pleasure and good food. I wanted to belong. I needed love. I strove to be the center of attention in the pile and sit in Papa's lap afterwards and feed on fresh strawberries because I was a good girl.

I definitely did not like taking a beating. I'm not talking about a tingly spanking delivered by hand or a whipping with a wooden paddle with holes drilled to reduce wind resistance or a

soft leather whip. I'm talking about a beating delivered with a cane. Once was enough for me. I became an immediate convert.

One of the minor Dominas at the time remarked my submission by praising me as a 'smart girl'. She meant it as a compliment and the other Dominas laughed when they called me 'smart girl' too but a couple of days later word came down from the penthouse they didn't like that epithet and everybody should stop calling me that. Papa didn't want smart girls. He wanted well trained and obedient girls. Good little girls. I strove to be good and please my Papa.

A couple of cuties took me by the hands and lead me into the shade of the citadel and around the corner and I figured they wanted me for inclusion in some Earthly delight. Instead they led me to a group of girls standing around without touching or embracing, an odd way for good girls to behave. With my arrival we formed a complete coven.

"Here's where they found her body," the real ringleader said. I looked where she was indicating and saw nothing but cobblestones. "She fell from up there." Our heads swiveled skyward with no more sense than a thirsty goose in the rain.

"She jumped from up there," I said, "and she landed here." I felt compelled to say something since they'd paid me the compliment of drawing me into their gang.

"She took the leap," Adorabella said.

I shrugged. "What do you expect me to do about it?"

"We want to go up there to see what it looks like, and we want you to show us. Take us up there."

"Why me?"

"Because you're smart."

"You're not supposed to call me that anymore. Papa doesn't like it. He said."

"I know," Adorabella said, "but you know it's true. I tell you what. I'll go with you. We'll go together." She grasped my hand. "We'll all go, together."

This type of incident is commonly referred to as being led astray.

Through an unlocked wooden door creaking outward I lead the way inside through shadows covering a slick foyer floor of polished interlocking slate stretching towards a dusky stairwell stacked stone upon stone rising evenly and smoothly step by step and row upon row curving upwards round about itself, twisting, spiraling, and disappearing up above and out of sight. Head reared back I peered into the high gloom looking for the turret somewhere unseen. I kept my shoulder to the wall on the right because the architect hadn't thought to include a guardrail in his design, an omission I could feel tugging me near the unprotected inner edge the higher I climbed. I experienced vertigo when we passed the first aperture and we could see

outside over the rooftops. The absence of handrails on either side angered me at this height.

We reached the turnout at the top of the tower when I admonished my naked comrades to pay attention to where they were standing so as not to fall down the stairwell at the center. They clustered in a group around the crenellations at the edge facing the sea and were awestruck by the view of the water from a vantage point they'd never enjoyed from that height. On the opposite side of the turret lay the one crenellation chiseled deeper than the rest with barely a step up separating a young girl from eternity.

I signaled my hearty crew to join me in my discovery of the jumping off point. Fear of high places left me embracing the stone corner at the entrance to the concrete ramp leading to the suicide leap. My doughty companion who had put me up to this adventure took position on the other side of the entrance towards the edge and we both peered toward the ledge as best we could on tip toes while remaining back at a safe distance. The launch pad couldn't have been more than a yard in circumference. The youngest little fool among us hopped onto the gangway and my second in command and I both reached out at the same time and lay hands on her shoulders to drag her back to safety.

The palms of my hands and the soles of my feet sweated like they always do anytime I contemplate plunging from a dizzying

height. My colleague nodded towards the edge as an indication I should be the one to investigate. I crouched down on hands and knees and crept closer to the edge. A girl had thrown herself from this very vantage point. I had no desire to follow her example but we hadn't followed her all that way not to peak over the edge. My fingers curled over the ledge and positioning my body weight as a counter balance I thrust my head out over the abyss. It was a long way down. Everything in between me and the cobble street was either a steep brick wall or empty air. A little girl died in a wingless flight, plummeting through the still born air she jumped on purpose. Love drove her to leap to her death. She meant to end her life. She succeeded, cracking her bones against the naked stones so far below. Dashing out her brains.

Hastily I crawled backwards off lover's leap and stood up on shaky sticks. Anxiety gripped my lungs and I laughed without mirth in sheer terror. I nodded my comrade towards the fatal ledge indicating, your turn. In reply, she solemnly shook her head no. The fright in her eyes must have mirrored my own. Standing on the brink she didn't want a turn when chasing ghosts had been her bright idea in the first place. In her cowardice I saw her differently. I had the strength to look. She did not. Suddenly, I found myself in charge and in my first directive I

ordered everyone away from the precipice and close to the wall and then down the stairwell.

On the way up we were cheerful in the throes of our misadventure. On the way down we were newly burdened by the weight and sanctity of human life. Those silly urchins weren't willing to take the first step in our decent. I had to work my way to the front of the line to show them myself how to get down. I warned them once again to keep their shoulders pressed to the wall and avoid the stairwell pit down the middle but the admonishment was hardly necessary. The task of leading became a challenge like herding kittens. If anything they were sillier in fear than they had ever been in joy. I had to work my way up and down the line several times urging them on. After that I felt like they were playing me so I left off haranguing them and trod down the stairs well ahead of them. Feigning panic or giving in to the real thing they called out for me to wait for them. I called back for them to step lively. One head and then two peeked over the edge of the stairwell. They weren't afraid of heights after all, little fakers. Still I waited and held out my hand to the little ones who were truly afraid. I grasped a hold of the first little girl and we formed a human chain and descended the long stone stairwell gaining strength from unity along the way.

Before long we stood lower than the roof tops and not long after that we were standing on solid ground outside the citadel. Standing on terra firma we marveled at the dizzying height. One little fool lay down brazen as you like on the hard cobblestones and pretended to be dead, a reenactment of the fatal sledge.

We laughed in horror even though the play acting wasn't in the least funny. They grew tired of that macabre game and looked to me for guidance. I led them back to the crowd along the beach and we melted into the scene like warm butter.

At bedtime that night as I lay in my big sister's arms I asked her when they would burn the pyre of the second flower girl. Never, she told me. They don't light a pyre for those who take the leap. Only for those who nature claims. I asked if any others had taken the leap. She affirmed there had been others. Years ago. Sad, beautiful, spiritual young girls who wouldn't adapt to pleasure.

Not long after that incident I was sold back into society. Sometimes when I'm asleep at night I dream about the Land of Nod and Papa who created us all. I wish I knew where that island was. Someday I'd like to go back there. It rained a lot and there was always plenty of fresh water to drink and I missed the warm embrace of my sisters.

"Goodbye, old world," I intoned. "Hello, new world."

Flash glanced fore and aft oblivious to the magnitude of the occasion. Maybe he couldn't tell the difference between the past and the future but I certainly could. I felt nothing short of amazed by the difference. The light of day itself shone differently, casting shadows where a moment ago none had existed. The Sun had changed color from bright yellow to burnt umber. The flora and fauna appeared roughly the same yet left to prosper without man's interference for untold epochs they'd thrived and prospered, repopulating the dead land. The future was also much quieter than the olden days and it occurred to me we were very possibly the only man and woman left to populate this new and unknown world.

We travelled the rest of the day on the frontiers of this new land before scaling a mountain side and discovering a cave I chose as the site of our new habitation. Allow me to assure you the irony of traveling so far into the future only to embrace a most primitive past was not lost on yours truly. But I didn't allow myself to become discouraged by these humble beginnings. On the contrary, I embraced this opportunity as a new start for mankind. I built a fire near the mouth of the cave and felt confident my enemies were so far lost in the past they would never spot this camp of new hope. Flash squatted near the fire with a sulky expression on his face and for a while I regretted bringing him with me into the future. I sure was glad he wasn't

my boyfriend. As I lay my head down I looked forward in my imagination to the dawning of a brand-new day. I must admit I felt a pang, just for an instant, for the long dead world we'd left behind. I hoped we hadn't travelled so far into the future that the sun would be on the verge of running out of fuel. I imagined how the old world had undoubtedly crumbled into dust by now and felt the tremendous moral responsibility of creating anew a civilization worthy of the name.

During the night I had a dream about a talking snake whispering sweet nothings in my ear. When I awoke near dawn I must admit I was troubled by the peculiarities of such a vision, but I reasoned snakes lacked the vocal chords necessary for speech and quickly dispelled any misgivings tempting my mental health into absurdist regions. In the last vestiges of darkness I stirred the fire back to crackling life and the shadows and light ricocheted wildly on the walls around me. Flash stirred in uneasy sleep but did not awaken. In a moment of inspiration I rushed outside and prowled the neighborhood hunting for herbs and colorful flowers I could employ in the service of creating brightly colored pigments. Most of the flowers I wasn't too sure about, it being the future full of new varieties. As a side note, I had thought about the importance of naming objects novel in the new world, but as it turned out I decided for the sake of clarity to stick to the old nomenclature.

I whipped up a batch of pigment in a wooden bowl I have to admit had been store-bought in the old world. What I mean is, I stole it from the Seneschal's kitchen, but before that I'm sure he purchased it from someplace nice.

My gaze roamed over the rock outcroppings, stalactites, and protuberances in search of inspiration. I thought I saw a box of kittens in one spot and cotton candy in another. Those items seemed too trivial to immortalize so I dipped both hands in the eggshell white pigment and proceeded to traverse the whole length of a rather smooth expanse of cave wall slapping high fives with both hands as I went. I ran back to the pigment bowl several times and plunged my hands in past the wrists and returned to the wall and shouted, "High five! High five!" Slapping imprints of my hands as I went. How could posterity ever misread signs as clear as these patty cakes.

To go along with the white I had other colors as well. At some point I decided to strip off my clothes and paint my body. Luckily, I'd thought to pack a fragment of mirror and with its aid I painted my whole being white as the base and then painted my lips and eyes blue and black and the top of my nose red and accentuated my more feminine parts with green because green is the color of new beginnings and hope.

Throwing more fuel on the fire I encouraged a crackling blaze. I didn't have any musical recordings so I had to rely

upon the tunes already stored inside my head. I pressed play and danced in a manner relying heavily upon improvisation. As the flames leapt higher I could feel the colored pigment drying like a second skin. In a state of ecstatic perturbation I leapt and pranced and cavorted around the fire in celebration of my primordial self. If I were less wedded to logic and reasoning I might even say I was transported by a kind of religious fervor. In the middle of my vision and accompanying gymnastics Flash awoke and catching sight of me in my tribal glory let loose a high-pitched squeal like a frightened little girl, with all apologies to littler girls everywhere, many of whom I know are tough as nails.

Flash crabbed backwards, any motion he could muster lying on his back to propel himself away from me. He was flailing towards the cave entrance so I bounded around him and blocked his escape so he changed course and did the back stroke towards the cave's interior. I must admit my antics were a tad sadistic, but when I saw the red fear in his eyes my sympathetic nature returned and I went to great lengths to reassure him it was merely I, Nika Savage's brain in Hater Glasscock's body with a touch of Nadezhda's soul I'd ingested by feasting on her heart. Despite these best efforts I had quite a time taming the poor man's hysterics.

Flash crouched in a corner of the cave and sniveled about how none of the bad things befalling me were in any way his fault. He hadn't ordered those troopers to attack me. In fact, on the day of the Seneschal's murder he'd been away traveling on business. Then he went farther back in time, claiming my inclusion in the brain transplant operation had been motivated by the noblest of life saving intentions. As I crouched before him he whimpered and begged and pleaded for his life in a manner most obsequious.

"Poor little grasshopper," I said, my sense of sympathy touched by the torment the poor boy was obviously experiencing. I realized how pale and frail and badly in need of vitamin D he was for the sake of his health. Maybe that high-powered sun block had done its job too well. Gripping the chain still tethering him I gently tugged enough for him to respond by crawling after me as I exited the caves mouth and emerged into the sunlight of a brand-new day. I tugged a little more and drew Flash forward into the light and left him there to ripen while I descended the hillside towards the valley floor clad as I was in nothing but primitive body paint. A fresh start, a new beginning, for myself, for all mankind, began on that morning beneath the warming glare of some futuristic sun. I could hear like the grinding of teeth the hurry-scurry of rodent's paws and claws upon the gritty desert hardpan. Though they were hidden

from plain view I could nevertheless hear them everywhere and smell their scatological fear crouching beneath the surrounding buck brush.

Dressed only in bright desert hues I stood my ground and listened to the nearby rustling. I coiled, and when I sprang my long thighs flexed and feet gripped the earth and the long-eared interloper sprang left, dodged right, but I was on him sprawling my length to snare his hind paw in my vicious grip. Poor thing uttered a high-pitched scream freezing the whole rest of the rodent community where they huddled in fear. I sucked its genitals into my maw before biting down and the warm blood spurted coating my mouth and the poor creature kicked and clawed with his dying breath and I availed myself to a helping of his entrails as the blood ran down my chin and I slurped and munched and the poor little rabbit's jaws tightened as they stretched and its mouth yawned open in the now silent death scream. I finally had to surface for air from the gory feast. I breathed in through my half full mouth, chewed and swallowed. I hadn't realized how hungry I was until the feast was half over and my gulping of the soft inner organs slowed. Tugging the hide loose I tossed the fur away and carried the meaty carcass back with me to cook over the fire the sake of poor young Flash.

I'm sure I must have looked a fright returning to the cave entrance. When I pressed my finger tip into his pale skin the

red glow around the indentation told me the poor creature had soaked up enough sun during my hunting expedition. I grabbed the end of his chain and tugged him along behind me as I entered the cave's cool shadows. For the first time in a long time Flash spoke to me. His tone sounded needy and desperate.

"Listen, if it's money you want, I can arrange for that. I know The Master would pay a ransom. I'm one of his most trusted field operatives. He'll pay to get me back. They do it all the time."

I couldn't help but smile at the mention of emoluments. What an antiquated notion.

"Obviously you have no idea how far into the future we've travelled. Your Master died long ago. Perhaps even eons ago. If there are any human beings left alive on this planet somewhere who've survived nuclear proliferation, then they've certainly progressed beyond a monetary system of barter by now."

My little speech turned out to be more reality than his pea brain could handle. Behind his large black plastic frames his eyes blinked rapidly a few times. Sometimes when people experience an information overload they undergo a process called cognitive dissonance, when rationality sort of shuts down for a while and they'll continue to talk the same old nonsense as a means of self-defense against the new knowledge their brain interprets as a threat to their survival. The terrible irony is

how the new knowledge actually offers them a sure path to survival but because it flies in the face of their total live-long acceptance of the lie their poor befuddled brain can't manage the shock and shuts down behind a denial mechanism. And thus they die.

"What are you talking about?" Flash said, and I couldn't help but smile patiently at his tone of incredulity.

"I don't expect you to be able to understand this right away, but on our way here we passed through a portal acting as a gap in the space time continuum. In a way, it worked like a slingshot, not just a dividing line between two worlds but in reality propelling us into a wholly different time dimension. So on the one hand while it might feel disconcerting when you realize that everyone and everything you ever loved is in fact long dead, a greater realization is possible, one freeing us from the bondage of the past and giving us an opportunity unique in human history; namely, to start over, to begin again. Begin anew. Well, maybe not unique in human history but seen fairly rarely."

Flash's head lolled about on the end of his neck as though physically burdened by the import of my weighty words.

"You're crazy," he muttered as his head came to rest leaning backwards against the cave wall for support, his mouth agape.

"They said the same thing about the Pope in Rome," I said. "Come with me, boy-o. Let's go outside again. I have something to show you that's going to blow your mind."

To my surprise Flash struggled to his feet and clutching my black panties to keep them from falling followed me without my having to yank on his chain to get him moving. We arrived outside and advanced to where the downhill slope commenced, affording the best, most unobstructed view of the desert valley floor. I waved my hand at the panoramic vista before us.

"We have a rare opportunity here, Flash. A new beginning. No talking snakes. No torrential rainfall. No campaign finance reform. I'm talking a brand-new start. The opportunity to begin again with the human race. Only this time, we'll be free of the kind of ignorance and superstition and greed bolloxing the whole show like it did last time. Look at it, Flash. Take it all in. Virgin territory. Never before touched. Just waiting for us to plant our seed."

Flash raised his eyes and then closed them against the sun's glare.

"It's just the Wasteland, Nika. Same as always." He lowered his head and opened his eyes. "Over that way, is the burning tire pit," he said, gesturing vaguely at the hills to our left, "and over there is the dry lake bed filled with plastic water

bottles. And that way, if you traveled far enough, you'd surely die, because that's the exposed core of an old nuclear reactor."

"That was a long time ago," I tried to reassure him. "Those hot materials cooled off a long time ago. They must have. You see, they would've only stayed radioactive for a mere hundred thousand years or so. You've not fully appreciating just how far into the future we've advanced to where we're now standing. You're trapped into thinking we left the citadel less than a week ago, where in reality, when we passed through the time space portal, we hurtled eons into the future. I mean just look at the sun, well, not directly at it, obviously, but at the way its rays now shine in a more sideways slant. Look at the strange new shadows its casting. You can't say you've ever seen dark and light like that before, can you? Can you!"

I didn't mean to badger him, but I really was quite insistent. I had to break through his cognitive denial fest somehow. After all, it was for his own good. He shook his head again as though trying to make the jumbled facts in his head line up properly, but he wasn't there yet. I was challenging some of his most cherished preconceived notions and he just wasn't prepared to accept the truth.

"Let's go back, Nika, and I'll help you get the help you need. You haven't done anything you can't be forgiven for. Sooner or later they're going to send out a search party, or

some random patrol will wander through this valley and you know what those troopers are like. I don't have to tell you."

I could only feel pity in my heart for that poor deluded soul.

"No patrol is ever going to wander through here, random or otherwise," I said, doing my best to remain patient. "Because they don't know where the time portal is and the chances against them discovering it on accident are astronomical. No, Flash my friend, the old world no longer exists, and it's up to us to repopulate. To start over. The situation might be a little incestuous at first, but we'll get through that phase eventually and separate out into different tribes as soon as it's convenient."

An unpleasant truth had dawned on me while I'd been outlining the future for my gentleman captive. A moral imperative rested upon the two of us to procreate, to propagate the species. For as unsavory as I may have found the proposal I resolved to go through with it for the good of mankind. Take one for the team, so to speak. Because I didn't feel anything like love or desire for Flash. It wasn't like he was my boyfriend or anything. But if we were going to repopulate the planet along more socio-economically equitable lines then we'd better get started right away. Granted I was a healthy young transgendered person, but it was also true I wasn't getting any younger

standing around trying to explain the nature of reality to this corporate Philistine.

Overcoming a good deal of my own cognitive dissonance I decided right then and there to do what I had to do, do the dirty deed with a male of the species and get it over with quick. I grabbed a hold of my black silk panties Flash was wearing and gave a mighty yank. They snapped apart and came away with barely any resistance. In his instinctual modesty, he covered himself with both hands. I smiled at his innocence and naivety. He kept pleading for mercy as I dragged him to the ground, but it was the way of saying no all boys use when you know full well what they really mean to say is yes. No one could ever claim it wasn't an honest rape. I mean, I had an easy time stroking him into hardness. You could tell he wanted it. Once I had him in the ready position my own new equipment proved operational as well. The nubs of my wings and tail vibrated with phantom limb pain in erotic sympathy.

Without too much ado he planted his seed inside of my fecund womb and the moment his wad was shot I raised him up and rested his head nestled between my dirty pillows. In the excitement of the moment my claws were pronged as I studied his veins pulsing with life giving blood. I drove in my nails and grasping firmly ripped away his scalp in one clean motion. My climax while delayed was thus ultimately satisfied. People refer

to it as grey matter. In my experience the human brain, the living brain anyway, is pink like cotton candy.

I knew two things with the utmost certainty. One, I'd been made pregnant, and secondly, I was famished. That type of hunger is what the midwives and witches mean when they talk about strange cravings and eating for both mother and child. I sank my incisors into his brain meat and it was delicious. He vibrated in a way that brought on a second climax for both of us. With their juicy texture his brains tasted like slightly greasy tripas. Instinctively I knew that I was doing the right thing. Morality is often times full of so many grey areas. As I munched and munched and munched, nom nom nom, plunging ravenously face first into his cranium's crater I knew this act was the sacrifice necessary to restore the human race and provide the reboot it needed so badly and also so richly deserved. I became dimly aware while I was feeding on his corpse Flash tried to plant a seed in me a third time but the second time had been unnecessary, let alone the third, icing on the cake. It did feel thrilling, but I never stopped feeding until I reached his cortex. Panting to catch my breath, exited, exalted, exhausted, I flung myself to one side and lay on my back in the sand next to my lover. Not my boyfriend, mind you, he was a boy who was my friend, but not really my boyfriend, if that makes sense.

Oh my goodness my tummy was full! I'd never eaten so much in one sitting in my entire life. I groaned and stroked my hands over my distended belly and worried for a time that I might develop a stomach ache. It must have been the tryptophan or something because I only closed my eyes for a second before I *klunk!* fell asleep.

The next morning I awoke refreshed after a sound night's sleep. I turned my head where I lay and looked over at Flash who was lying on his back in the same position where I'd left him last night. His face wore a most peculiar expression, rather akin to shock, I suppose. The top of his head was still missing. In my exuberance I had flung it like a Frisbee into the buck brush and overnight it had disappeared, stolen, vanished, gone.

I rolled onto my side and reached over, cupping his jaw in my hand and pressing his mouth closed but it just fell open again. Then I did something I'd never done with Flash before. I leaned over sideways and French kissed him on the mouth. I'm not into guys at all but I must admit he was a pretty good kisser.

I was still covered in my caveman paint from the previous day and now wore an extra layer of sand granules covering the full length of my backside. I felt like a breaded veal cutlet.

Confident Flash wasn't going anywhere any time soon I left him and went inside the cave and I stood near the middle next to the fire pit. I don't mean to be vulgar, but since no one was

watching, I yawned and scratched my backside. The stalactites provoked a certain amount of reflection on my part. When I looked again I saw not only a geologic formation. What I saw sent me scurrying back to my pigment bowels. What I hoped to concoct was a hue akin to flesh tone. What I managed instead amounted to shocking pink. Given more time and the material necessary for experimentation I probably could have found a proper source for a better brown. There simply weren't enough resources to do quality work. Such being the case I plunged my hands into the bowl brimming with shocking pink and slathered those hanging pylons and in so doing formulated the likeness of a baby. As I neared the ceiling my bowl ran dry so the image on the ceiling was roughly to the scale of a normal sized human baby but her stalactite hind quarters were gargantuan. So granted my picture didn't turn out at all like I'd imagined the picture in my mind. Giant baby long legs. I don't know how else to describe it. Creativity can take odd turns like that and sometimes as an artist you just have to go with your gut instinct.

The rock outcroppings suggested a configuration entirely different. In honor of the sacrifice Flash had made towards the propagation of the species I painted two different portraits facing away from each other. The one represented the man as a visionary, full of life and radiating optimism in the form of

lightning bolts shooting from his eyes. The other portrait showed his scalp standing straight up like a lid on a hinge and his human brain flying forth out of his cranium, born aloft by a pair of gorgeous white wings. Not exactly the way events had transpired but in those circumstances I felt justified in taking a certain amount of poetic license, a concept I decided to revive against the strict modern criteria for producing consumable goods. Lacking any clear aesthetic, the human race reverted to obeying something they called the rules of art, a set of criteria for producing a best seller. Not me. If you wanted to see my work of art, then you'd have to duck your head before you enter my darkened cave just like anyone else. I lit a fire and the flames cast shadows and light refracting wildly illuminating and obscuring my paintings.

I felt grimy covered in paint and sweat and badly in need of a shower. Picking my way to the back of my cave I carefully eased myself down through a hole and slapped my bare feet and hands for leverage against the boulders of this inner sanctum. Water from an underground causeway echoed further down where a beam of light drifted via a long narrow crack in the Earth's surface. No clean water existed anywhere. Only secret water like this intimate source survived the fall.

Beneath a beam of light filtering down from a hundred feet above the shadows harbored a dainty pool of the clean stuff,

clean and green and purified over a bed of sparkling pebbles. I stood beneath the water's fall to wash away the body paint and felt guilty about the mire I was adding to this last pure fount. Tipping back my head I drank deep the Perion Spring and told myself I'd never leave. Surface denizens lived their whole lives never experiencing such refreshing plenty. With so much clean drinking water I felt positively confident about nurturing a child in my belly.

Bathed in shadows naked I sat contemplating the light beyond my reach. By passing through the time portal I had been granted the promise of a new beginning but something precious had been lost as well. The voices of my two best friends had fallen dead silent. As though they'd been stripped away as objects not allowed to be carried any farther on the journey. As I sat listening to the water's constant splashing at the center of the surrounding silence I realized I could barely hear their voices in my memory. Other than that distant hum they were no longer there. Their independent speaking voices I had come to rely on had gone silent and for the first time in a long time I felt totally by myself. Utterly alone.

I returned to the well day after day, in between visits eating potage and rodents, filling out my emaciated frame. Down in that hole in the Earth I was naked and felt unashamed. Communing with the waterfall allowed time for recollecting the

past and sorting out the details of my torture and defeat at the hands of the Master of the Citadel.

Sometimes I brought with me my clothing to slap and scrub against the rocks. I tried not to lapse into total barbarism no matter how often my thoughts revolved around revenge and mayhem. For several days I focused on tidying up the cave, moving rocks and sticks aside, relocating the fire pit closer to the entrance to discourage the whole rest of the animal kingdom from joining me in my sleep without thereby creating a beacon either. Who knew how successfully humanity might have evolved during the eons I transgressed in the space of a single step through the time portal. My feelings of loneliness dissipated and I realized I was actually enjoying my seclusion and I wasn't in any hurry to rejoin the company of men.

Days had elapsed when my olfactory senses detected the sickly-sweet odor in the cave, and in retrospect I can see now I became aware of the stench a full day before its presence could no longer be ignored and following the putrid smell to its sources finally made the connection to the dead and decaying corpse lying a few yards away from the cave's mouth. As I approached the dead body the impact on my senses was pungent and instantaneous. I pinched closed my nostrils and covered my mouth and retreated several yards. Going back inside the cave I rummaged through the volume and retrieved a scarf I tied around

my neck and pulled over my nose and mouth and I thought of the fancy rebreathers Mr. Hater always equipped us with on our main adventures across the heavily polluted Wasteland. I experienced a disassociation moment because the mind body dichotomy, my mind, his body, now surgically altered in order to conform more to my brain's expectations. I have to admit I continued to feel discombobulated as though a separation existed between my mind and body, this brain transported everywhere that body, as I approached the task grasping the stinking rotting corpse by the ankles and dragging the lump a safe distance downhill where I arrived at the head of an animal trail leading to the way down to the desert floor and figured as long as I was at it I might as well solve the problem once and for all. About halfway down that trail Flash's flesh sloughed off in my grip and I was left holding nothing more than rotting flesh in my hands having lost my grasp on the corpse itself. I fanned my hands to rid myself of that revolting mess and I didn't vomit exactly but I did stumble away a few yards and wretched several warm ups producing a clear viscous bile. I spat disgustedly. White dots swam through my vision as I stood bent over forearms on knees and commenced feeling sorry for myself. I spat again and blew a couple of snot rockets and snorted back the rest before turning to face once more the task at hand, this time grasping the corpse by the other ankle. Since I'm resolved to tell the truth

regardless of how unflattering doing so may make me appear, I hereby do freely admit, when the first opportunity presented itself, I flung the dead body none too gently down the last length of incline and let gravity take over and do the rest. The damned object flippy-flopped over and over again before finally coming to an abrupt stop lying flat on its back on the level sand of the desert floor.

Allow me to assure you I didn't tarry but instead abruptly toiled back up the hill and returned to the cave. The rotting corpse stench lingered like a supernatural presence until I kindled a roaring fire. Nothing cleanses like fire. I drank some water and ate a couple of sweet figs restoring my sense of equilibrium. Body and mind and I dare say soul reunited for the nonce and I say soul only in the sense of energy source animating my frame without any reference to the kind of metaphysical nonsense clouding my judgement in the past.

Not too long afterwards a murder of crows swooped into the neighborhood drawn undoubtedly by the victuals offered up by Flash's Earthly remains. They circled about and commenced caterwauling over their tremendous good fortune. While I marveled over the natural process of reclamation being played out in my general vicinity I must confess to mixed feelings about these creatures. On the one hand, I admired these birds and their obvious intelligence. On the other hand, when I went

to observe their machinations more clearly they set up such a cacophony as though I had arrived on the scene to steal their plunder I actually bid a hasty retreat and as though they had sent one of their members to ensure my withdrawal one of those black devils circled over my vicinity until I was well away from their eating space. I'm just saying they gave too much attitude. It was hard not to take it personally. I had encroached closely enough to appreciate the short work they were making from the soft tissue of his face. The eyeballs were gone, the lips, the nose.

I returned the next day to further inspect their beak-work while careful to respect a certain distance. They had removed the ears and pecked through the cheeks clean down to the bone. The slack jaw and exposed teeth formed a beautiful rictus. The mummer was no longer recognizable as Flash. Once again however those crows started in reckless eyeballing me and caw-cawing their displeasure at my presence.

I left them to continue their feeding uninterrupted. They weren't the only ones who could cop an attitude. I think we all know who helped themselves to the choicest bits already. Sorry I'm higher up on the food chain, but there you have it.

I was superstitious and wouldn't go near them. The thought occurred to me of throwing a rock at those noisome creatures. I wanted to scatter them and really give them something to cry

about. Upon further reflection, I reasoned more coherently, leaving off any diabolical intentions, accepting them for the role they had to perform in keeping the desert floor slicked clean. Until one day as I promenaded in my flesh exposed for the whole world to see except for some cute little leather sandals on my feet and I was making my way along the base of the hill on an errand unrelated to Flash and his rotting mortal remains when I happened across them having forgotten him entirely for I don't know how many weeks.

In charity, I cannot say that the general odor had improved any and the general extent of the stench only having diminished, not the pungency. His corpse had become overgrown with a bacteria or moss at its best yellow green, at its worst moribund black. As I stood at a distance contemplating the cadaver in its most recent stage of decomposition my perceptions slowly congealed around that some part of the picture was missing. A moment's contemplation supplied an answer. One of his arms was gone. The whole appendage, right up to but not including the shoulder.

Some hungry desert denizen had no doubt yanked the arm loose and absconded with it. For the first time the thought of burying those remains crossed my mind, which would put an end to any more banditry of that sort. The shroud of moss under which lay those parts dissuaded me from such a project. I have a fear

of mold, much more so than pollen. To avoid the decomposing body I continued around the mountain's base and took the other trail leading to my cave. I continued by passing that particular route for I don't know how long, weeks, months. Then one day I was out terrorizing the rodent population, not that I had anything against them, personally. I was hungry, when I came upon the missing arm entangled in a bush. I was surprised by this find because as I looked around I realized it wasn't very far at all from the rest of the remains. For some reason I assumed whatever wild beast had carried it off would've taken the artifact back to its den or lair or what have you. The poor starving creature hadn't travelled more than a matter of some yards before abandoning its treasure. I reached down and picked up the bones and inspected how the cartilage stubbornly held together the whole apparatus.

In a nostalgic effort to return the appendage to its rightful resting place I carried the arm and hand over to where Flash lay. His bones by this late date were beautifully bleached. The wild creatures, insects, mold, bacteria, modest rain, and copious sunlight had each done their part reducing a man of flesh and blood right down to the bone, while the overall skeletal structure remained remarkably intact.

The arm and hand I held, separated early on in the process, had deteriorated at a slower rate, not exactly scrubbed clean,

and so the finger bones still clung together and the hand remained connected to the wrist, and the wrist to the brachioradialus. On a whim I gripped the arm and waved the hand in a friendly greeting.

"Hello! Hello fellows! Long time, no see."

I don't know why I found Flash waving at himself funny. In retrospect it wasn't funny at all. Kind of sick and demented. I didn't mean to be disrespectful. But to tell you the truth I really don't believe in such superstitions. I mean, Flash had been gone for a long time. So what if I played with his bones a little? I wiggled his own hand at him a few more until the novelty wore off. Then I went ahead and placed the arm back in its proper position. Doing so dislodged the shoulder bone toppling the head so the jaw fell to pieces. I stood there for a moment regarding my handiwork and felt indifferent at the results. Casting about for inspiration I caught sight of a rather large triangular chunk of obsidian.

The turning jogged my memory and when I turned back the stone had transformed into a tool suitable for digging a shallow grave perfect for interring bones. I scraped and dug right next to the corpse creating a pretty decent rectangular hole. I tried to flip the remains but the whole business went to pieces. I stood up and started kicking and all the bones made it into the final resting place, just not in any discernable order. Future

archeologists from another planet would find plenty to puzzle over with that befuddled arrangement. Employing my spade I flipped the dislodged dirt pile into covering the bones completely then the obsidian underwent another transformation as I plunked it down as a headstone. Brushing dirt from my hands I tried to think of something meaningful to say marking the occasion.

"Poo-poo-pee-do."

My sendoff was more fanfare than he deserved. For the first time in a long time I took the near trail up the mount to the cave. I kindled a new fire from the ashes of the old and sat on the smooth mud floor and contemplated the fire spirit twisting yellow and red. I tried to make sense of the various misadventures I'd been on in my double life and didn't know what to make of the several, constant defeats inflicted by my enemies. Fighting for my integrity should have paid better.

The next day I visited the water well and yet I found myself dismayed to find the fount had dwindled to a trickle. Naked and unashamed I sat with arm outstretched fingering the water as it fell. Some days were like this, thin and treacly and hardly worth the effort. Other days water gushed full force so much so I could barely withstand the torrent.

During the drought cycles I often didn't bother to plumb the depths. I figured if the water wouldn't come why try to

force it. Instead I would curl up with a good book and lose myself for hours. Sometimes a type of madness would emerge where I would catch myself reading nine or ten books in rotation without making real progress in any one of them. I'd read in one for a while before setting it aside and picking up another. Every book I owned had a bookmark in it about a quarter of the way through, and so while I lived alone I was never lonely. Like Natty Bumppo I reveled in the solitude of the forest primeval.

Through no fault of my own I'd developed marvelous survival skills and lived to tell about it. By escaping into the future I'd left my enemies behind, buried under centuries of radioactive dust. In the twilight of their grandeur the evil scientists who worked for the Dark Matter Corporation had performed major surgical wonders, including a brain implant and a gender realignment restoring me to my female form. The men with white collars or in white lab coats hadn't anticipated the gothic mutations I'd undergone nor were they directly responsible for the mayhem perpetuated on my person. I'm sure they would've have been more than happy to study and observe the results of their handiwork but the prevailing mutant hysteria put an end to that possibility.

From the voluminous bag I extracted a red handkerchief tied up in a bundle. Untying it revealed the cutest little shrunken head belonging to my erstwhile girlfriend. Between the head in

my hand and the body encasing me I couldn't help but wonder at the treasure trove of DNA I could supply to the brain boys back at the lab. Genetic reproduction, I scabbled about in my brain for the proper terminology, cloning. I knew they were capable of the process. The problem would be providing the proper motivation. I don't have any idea why they bothered turning me back into a human girl. To see if they could? Because they knew they could? Who knows why. But they did it. Right down to the last detail including a womb implant and now as a result I was clearly in the family way. Either that or the swelling in my belly indicated the growth of a monstrous tumor.

